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"OPEN, SESAME!"

Mrs. BAILLIE REYNOLDS

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"OPEN, SESAME!"

MRS. BAILLIE REYNOLDS

By MRS. BAILLIE REYNOLDS

"OPEN, SESAME!"
THE KING'S WIDOW
THE LONELY STRONGHOLD
A CASTLE TO LET
THE DAUGHTER PAYS
THE COST OF A PROMISE
A DOUBTFUL CHARACTER
A MAKE-SHIFT MARRIAGE
OUT OF THE NIGHT
THE GIRL FROM NOWHERE
THE NOTORIOUS MISS LISLE

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

"OPEN, SESAME!"

BY

MRS. BAILLIE REYNOLDS

AUTHOR OF "THE KING'S WIDOW,"
"THE LONELY STRONGHOLD," ETC.

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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CONTENTS

I

PAGE

"OPEN, SESAME!" 9

II

IT BEGAN WITH A WEDDING 78

III

HER FINAL CHOICE 148

IV

THE HAUNTED WELL 218

"OPEN, SESAME!"

I

THE sun-rays were beginning to slope westwards across the ramparts and towers of the ancient city of Fort d'Olonne, in Southern France. The *Lycée* for girls was closing its doors, and the pupils were drifting out across the road in twos and threes.

As they went they cast glances, shy or mischievous, at a young man in civilian clothes who stood leaning upon a stick; gazing with elaborate unconcern into the window of a little shop where they sold rosaries, plaster saints, and picture postcards.

"There," they whispered, "is Monsieur le Marquis once again, waiting for the English mademoiselle who boards with his mother."

"Tiens!" said everybody, in varying tones; and Valérie Marlot added, with a toss of her head:

"True, Fort d'Olonne in war-time is as dull as a convent! It is perhaps a relief to the monotony even to escort Miss Waldron home."

"Let us dawdle in the Rue des Montagnes," suggested Aliette Roseau, "and watch them pass."

They strolled, giggling and chattering, into the steep street where were the principal shops—a street which stood as it were on end, having been taught centuries

ago by its Roman makers to climb, and to look sharp about it. It reared itself up against the flank of Mont d'Olonne, a foot-hill of the Pyrenees, with an abruptness which never failed to startle strangers.

The patience of the *Lycée* girls was presently rewarded by the spectacle of the advancing couple—Alain de Bérault, Marquis de la Rochequisouve, limping actively along, and at his side a slender girl in a linen suit, with a wide-brimmed hat shading her resolute blue eyes.

Ismay Waldron was almost a native of Fort d'Olonne, her father having been chaplain to the English community there ever since the noted baths had been exploited and the place became a fashionable resort.

When war broke out the visitors melted like snow in summer; and the chaplain, being no longer needed there, accepted an invitation to take up an appointment in Spain, and crossed the border with his wife, leaving Ismay, who had just been appointed teacher of English at the *Lycée,* in the care of their old friend, Madame de la Rochequisouve.

It was now many months since Alain, the young Marquis, had been invalided home by the French War Office authorities, the injury to his leg being thought to be incurable. He was to have a few weeks of *permission,* and then go to sedentary Government duty in Paris. At the end of his *permission,* however, his native air had worked such wonders for the mangled limb that his leave was extended; and so again, and yet again. His limp now hardly impeded his activity, and hopes of once more seeing his regiment danced before him.

How much of the cure might be laid to his state of mind, who shall say?

If her only son had fallen in love, madame his mother remained as ignorant of it as though she had been

a child. Such a catastrophe was out of her power to conceive.

Ismay was not noble, and this, in the eyes of Alain's mother, was final. Alain could not by any possibility have serious intentions towards a girl who was not noble, unless she had chanced to be a great heiress, which poor Ismay emphatically was not.

Perhaps Valérie was right in supposing that the prevailing dullness made even Miss Waldron a break in the monotony. The girl who taught English did not appeal to her pupils as one to inspire a *grande passion*. She had the dun-coloured hair and eyebrows, the faintly tinted skin, of the clean-bred upper-class English girl. Her lips were neither full nor scarlet, and her glance was rather direct and purposeful than smiling or alluring. The talk of the two as they wended their way upward showed rather the friendliness of long intercourse than any disturbing consciousness of one another.

"Such a curious thing happened to-day," she was telling him. "I went to the Pâtisserie Clément for my lunch—it was so hot I felt as if I must have an ice, whatever it cost. The place was fuller than I have seen it since war began, a good many Spanish, and some Americans. There was the usual babel of voices, when there occurred, as you know happens sometimes, one of those complete silences—only momentary—but for some unexplained reason, everyone suddenly stopped talking, and across the hush there floated to my ear—what do you think? A bit of a sentence *spoken in German!*"

"German? Impossible!"

"I assure you it was so. You don't speak German. I'll give you the meaning of the words—'the secret of the tunnel would be ours.' I started, as did several people near where I sat. Heads were turned, but I saw nobody who looked German, and nobody who looked

conscious. Then a voice said, with a strong American intonation, 'Why, sure, someone spoke German then?' His companion laughed and replied, 'Some nerve the beggar must have—what?' 'What were they saying?' the first speaker wanted to know. 'Caan't tell you that. Don't speak the lingo myself,' was the answer.

"Odd," said the Marquis thoughtfully. "I have always supposed we were safe from spies. So far from Germany, and so insignificant." . . . He broke off, for they had reached the base of the toy-like funicular railway, whose road ran up an almost perpendicular slope.

Having paid their helfpenny, they were carried up aloft into the glorious air, the liquid gold of the sunset, and the spicy fragrance of the pines. Below them lay the ancient city, her mediæval fortress dominating the scene, and out to their right the large new cordite works made raw-looking flecks of red and white with their small, isolated sheds dotted against the mountain's foot.

The two leaned, side by side, over the stone wall which guarded the angle of the mountain road, turning sharply upon itself in a hairpin bend. Ismay was looking outward, her usually sober expression tinged with enthusiasm, as though her soul saluted the loveliness around.

Her companion's soul saluted the loveliness of the face so close to his. What, he wondered, was it which gave the key to her curious charm? The cloudiness of the dun-coloured hair? Or the clear cutting of her too closely guarded mouth? He sometimes wanted to hold her fast and kiss that mouth, coaxingly, urgently, until he kissed the lips apart.

"Beautiful," she murmured, "so beautiful—and all your own! The Marquis de la Rochequisouve ought to be a proud man."

He laughed shortly.

"And is actually a very discontented one. He would love more than anything to see a huge factory arise, built upon his ground, for which he would receive a huge rent. His thoughts are embittered almost to madness when he looks at the munition works and reflects that the Government has dumped them upon almost the only bit of the valley which he does not own."

"I fear that was madame your mother's fault. She was so angry when the town council approached her——"

"Yes, yes. I was away. So unlucky."

"You would have permitted it?"

"I would have welcomed it."

"For shame, O descendant of Charlemagne! Why so greedy?"

He was silent for a long moment.

"If I tell you that, I tell you all," he answered simply.

She did not answer, not because she understood him, for she did not, but because the sound of voices could be heard upon the road behind them, and she waited to speak until the wayfarers should have passed. The approaching footsteps hesitated, paused quite near.

"Why," said somebody with the unmistakable American accent, "what's the matter with asking these kind folks to di-rect us? They look friendly, don't they?"

His companion cleared his throat, and began hesitatingly.

"Pardong, monsieur et madame; pourriez-vous nous dire——"

Ismay turned, and found herself facing the American who had remarked upon the German spoken that day in the restaurant. He was a stoutish, middle-aged man with sandy hair, shaven cheeks, and a prosperous air. His companion she did not recognise. He was not

more than thirty, and had one of those faces, both expressive and impressive, which one is apt to call typical of America. He was looking amused at his friend's efforts, so that Ismay could not help smiling a little herself as she said quietly:

"I speak English."

"Why, that's vurry fortunate. We want to be directed to the"—he consulted a card in his hand—"to the Chatto de Roach-key-soove."

Alain came to the rescue, lifting his cap slightly.

"If you follow the road upward, sir," said he in creditable English, "you will come to the château gates on the left, a little beyond the third bend."

"We are greatly obliged, sir. I think we travelled up the mountain side with you, in that strange insect they call a funicular?"

As this seemed intended to be humorous, Ismay smiled vaguely.

Thus encouraged, the stranger continued:

"May I ask if you are yourself a native of this lovely spot?"

"No sir; I am not," said the girl, with a coldness meant to be noticeable. The gentleman, however, did not take the hint.

"Then maybe you caan't inform us by any lucky chance whether the noble Marquis is himself at home?"

After an instant's hesitation, Alain resigned himself to the inevitable.

"I am De la Rochequisouve," said he, stepping forward.

The two Americans looked delighted.

"Sure, this is great," said the elder genially extending his hand in such certainty of response that the Marquis took it to avoid seeming brutal. "We have come to so-licit a business interview with you, sir," he went on expansively, extracting a plethoric pocket-book,

from which he took a card. "That's me—Conrad Blick, of Boston, Mass. This is my cousin, Valentine Drew, doctor of medicine, who practises in New York City."

Alain acknowledged the introduction, but did not present Miss Waldron to the two men.

"This," he said, "is not the most convenient spot for a business interview. Perhaps you would accompany me as far as the château?"

"With all the pleasure in life," said the genial Mr. Blick, "and I only hope you won't assist us out with your boot when you hear what we want—for I like to be puffectly frank, so I may as well warn you that our errand is one which some French aristocrats would not encourage. We want to rent a bit of your land."

"The proposal," said Alain in his careful English, "is not in itself disagreeable to me, gentlemen. I may add, however, that Madame la Marquise and I do not always see eye to eye in this matter, so you will be careful——"

Mr. Blick broke in with effusion:

"My own sympathies go entirely with Madame la Marquise," said he, bowing very low to Ismay.

The girl would have given much to check the blush that flew to her cheeks, and to have been able to reply, as did the young man, with perfect composure and correctness:

"You have misunderstood me, sir. I alluded to madame my mother. I am unmarried. Will you follow me?"

As the Americans cheerfully turned up the road in the direction indicated, the eyes of the young man and the girl met. Familiar with the domestic conditions at the château, she read his thoughts with ease.

"I'll go up the short cut," she said in an undertone, "and tell Madame that you are bringing visitors."

He raised his hat, and his eyes were grateful for her quick comprehension. Ismay smiled at him, hardly knowing why she smiled, and turning, climbed a stone stile or gap in the wall, and ran off up a meadow gemmed with wild flowers, while the Marquis joined his guests.

"That's a vurry charming young lady, markee," observed Mr. Blick, sure of saying the right thing this time.

"*Justement, monsieur.* You will doubtless have informed yourself respecting the position and extent of the land I hold?"

Dr. Drew glanced in covert amusement at Blick, who, after a moment's bewilderment, accepted the change of subject.

Ismay, as she hastened up the steep short cut, was pondering the vagaries of fate. Had a mocking devil been at the elbow of the young Marquis when he uttered his wish so short a while ago? It is seldom indeed that fulfilment drops so promptly into the lap of desire! There seemed to be something uncanny about it.

II

CHATEAU ROCHEQUISOUVE stood upon the south-eastern curve of Mont d'Olonne, the last eminence of any size to rear itself up apart from the parent range. It was thus completely hidden from the town, and the valley commanded by its windows was wild and solitary. The centre and one wing were of the time of François Ier iwth flying tourelles and rounded oriels. The left wing had been partly burned during the Terror, and Alain's great-grandfather had rebuilt it in the style of the first Empire.

Here was the porte-cochère, under which one entered.

Old Landry, the concierge, awoke from his nap and peeped from his box at the sound of the girl's light footfall.

"Hola, little lady, where hast thou left our seigneur?" he asked.

"He is bringing company—two American gentlemen. Put on thy coat, old one," laughed Ismay. "I go to warn his lady-mother."

She ran across the paved courtyard, where sheeny doves strutted among the oleander tubs, whisked through a little postern door, and disappeared.

Alain's mother was an older woman than one might suppose. She was forty years old when he was born—the youngest of her children and the only one to survive infancy. The year 1914 had found her still undecided upon the great question of an adequate match for her son. Now, after nearly three years of war, Alain was nearing thirty, and still unwed.

When Ismay knocked at the door of the old lady's faded morning-room, she was busy composing a letter to her friend the Vicomtesse la Faille, who, with her daughter Thérèse, had taken refuge in London, suggesting that they both should come to La Rochequisouve for the duration of the war. From the composition of this important document she looked up vaguely as Ismay entered the apartment.

"You want something, my child?"

"To tell you that Monsieur le Marquis has been caught by two American gentlemen wishing to see the château——"

"Americans!"

Madame belonged irrevocably to the old school. The tone she used in speaking of the great nation so soon to become the devoted allies of France was much the same which she would have used to say—*"Canaille."*

Ismay knew her idiosyncrasies, in and out. She smiled indulgently as she went soft-footed through the room, collecting vases in which the roses were drooping. "I will refill these, and then come back to help you make your toilette, Madame. Can I give any orders to Françoise?" she added, pausing on the threshold.

The Marquise made a slight sound of irritation, but she knew that she would be obliged to ask the gentlemen to supper. Up on the mountain, no food, no entertainment of any kind was procurable, except at the château; and the hospitable tradition of La Rochequisouve must not be forgotten.

"Tell Françoise that covers must be laid for two extra, and that she had better dress the hare," said she; and Ismay, thus commissioned, went off to see that all was put in train.

She soon returned, and marched Madame, who kept no maid now, into her room, to be made ready to receive her guests. The English girl had a genius for arranging hair; and when the work was done, the Marquise, gazing into her mirror, remarked, almost unwillingly:

"You are a useful child, Mademoiselle Waldron."

Landray said quietly, as he admitted the Marquis and his visitors:

"Madame will receive these gentlemen when your business is done."

And Alain, as he gave the necessary invitation, knew whom to thank for his mother's graciousness.

Life was indeed, as Valérie had surmised, dull at times, up at the château; and Ismay prepared for the evening with a disproportionate feeling of excitement, and a very pretty gown. Something in the eyes and manner of Valentine Drew appealed to her. She was heartily weary of the perpetual guardedness necessary

in her dealings with the Marquis. Sometimes she wondered what the grave young man would think could he but see her as she really was.

A naughty imp danced in her eyes at the thought. Would Dr. Drew at table that night give her a chance to show Alain the fabric of which her true self was woven?

She went downstairs presently, and was seated demurely upon a *pouffe* at the knees of the Marquise, with an air of being very much the dutiful companion who sorted embroidery silks, when the three men entered the room.

Alain made the presentations with his usual quiet ease. As Mr. Blick spoke very little French, and Madame no English, it was a little difficult; but Blick bowed repeatedly, ejaculating *"Enchanté! Enchanté!"* like a toy wound up to bow and squeak.

Then the Marquise turned to Ismay.

"Mees Waldron, permit that I present to you these gentlemen. Messieurs—Mees Waldron, a young English lady who is staying with me during the absence from home of her parents."

Conversation was not easy; and at first Madame conversed most with Dr. Drew, whose French was the best. But at supper she had one gentleman each side of her, and Ismay being on the other side of the doctor —it must be owned that she arranged it herself—they began, after a while, to converse in English together with relief and mutual pleasure.

She began by asking what he thought of the château, and he replied, with warmth, that he felt as if he were sitting in a Pullman car, reading half-dollar fiction. That such a place and such people really existed would have seemed to him "laffable" in New York.

"And, to complete it, you tucked away in the middle of it all," said he appreciatively. "Say, would it be

unpardonable to ask what you are doing in this galley?"

"Chained to my oar," she replied, with mischief in her eyes, "I teach English at the *Lycée* and Madame la Marquise, who has known my people for many years, most kindly took me in when they had to leave Fort d'Olonne. By the way, I saw your friend at lunch to-day."

"Did you, indeed? Where was that?"

"At the Pâtisserie Clément, when there was a curious incident."

Blick, from his seat opposite, broke in.

"You were at the Clément to-day? Were you indeed? Then you heard that fragment of German?" He seemed to await her reply keenly, and as she assented he went on eagerly: "Do you understand German?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, that was mighty curious, wasn't it? Do you mind telling me what they said?"

"I only heard a very small bit. It might have meant anything. 'The secret of the tunnel will be ours.' But the Channel Tunnel isn't made yet, is it? However, it sounded to me horribly Boche-like and suspicious. The odd thing was, I couldn't see anybody who looked to me guilty."

He smiled.

"Say, did you notice a lady, a vurry pretty woman, dressed in dark blue, and a flyaway hat with ears of corn on it? She was lunching with a French officer?"

"Yes. Certainly I noticed her."

"Ever seen her before?"

"Several times. I can tell you who she is."

"I feel mighty curious to know."

"Her name is Madame Mieg. She is an Alsatian refugee, and is staying with that officer, Monsieur Jarriet, and his wife."

"Ah! That accounts for the thing quite simply. Many Alsatians speak German, don't they?"

"But it was a man who spoke."

"No doubt Colonel Jarriet understands German. I suppose he is above suspicion?"

"Altogether," said the Marquis, breaking in quickly.

"Well, there you are."

"Mr. Blick is a keen observer," said Ismay to Valentine Drew.

"Sure. Don't you think the study of one's fellow-creatures is the most absorbing interest of life?"

She agreed; adding that, if one had a sense of humour, much amusement was to be derived from the class of flappers which she taught.

That launched them into a discussion of humour. They spoke of Mark Twain and Mr. Gelett Burgess, of the odd fact that one can offer no deadlier insult than to tell men or women that they have no sense of humour. Thence they diverged to the total lack of humour in the German; to the fact that the type of it now so highly developed in England and the United States is the ironic type; and the resulting fact that the works of Jane Austen are more appreciated now than they were in her own day.

As they grew more absorbed in their talk and in each other, the Marquis at his end of the table became increasingly silent and stiff. He really looked as if he had a ramrod down his back.

This was a new Ismay altogether. Why did she never talk with him, laugh with him, as with this newcomer? What had the young American which he had not? With what key had he unlocked the tongue which Alain found so reticent?

The supper was nicely cooked and well served, in spite of the depletion of the château staff by the calling-up of all the able-bodied males.

At the beginning of the war, Madame had declared that she could not possibly be served at table by women, and had imported a Spanish footman, a dark, silent, cat-like man, who turned out to be a spy, and crept away one night, never to return, carrying with him a few valuables, and, it was to be supposed, some information, though of what nature Ismay and the family often wondered.

Since the warning of Esteban, and his sinister behaviour, the Marquise had given in, and only girls from the neighbourhood now assisted old Pierre, the white-headed butler.

Madame did not allow smoking in her part of the château, so after the meal Ismay suggested to Alain that they might drink coffee on the terrace. He approved this as an excellent idea, allowing him to offer his fine cigars to his prospective tenants; he was still more pleased when he found that rugs had been spread on the flags, and chairs and tables placed in readiness.

"Why don't we always have coffee out here in the warm weather?" he asked in gratified tones, as the girl carried his cup to him.

"Surely your Majesty has but to command," she replied, smiling up at him, and unconsciously using towards him for the first time the tone of light teasing which she had been employing with the American doctor. And—all in a moment—something disconcerting happened. *Alain smiled back at her.*

It does not sound a very earth-shaking episode; but it had a great effect. Such a smile of appreciative, rather mischievous, camaraderie she had never had from the young man before. It put them, in a moment, upon a level which was new in their intercourse. For the very first time since she came to the château Ismay's own manner to him had been unguarded; had been,

in short, the manner she would naturally use to a man of her own age and class in England. She had laid herself open to a suspicion on the part of the Marquise that she was trying to begin a flirtation.

And to all appearance, the grave young man needed but little encouragement. His response had leapt to meet her invitation! She felt quite hot and horrified as she turned away, nervously plunging once more into conversation with Mr. Drew, who begged her to show him the exact spot on the lower terrace where, during the Revolution, the old Marquis and his men had met the *sans-culottes*, and kept them at bay while the women and children were smuggled safely away.

"Where did they hide them?" asked the young man with interest.

"Hide them? I don't know that they hid them exactly. They escaped into Spain, in charge of some faithful servants. The Marquis was a huge man, they say, and he picked up the leader of the mob and pitched him over the parapet, down among the rocks. He fell on his head and broke his neck. Then he offered the same treatment to anyone else who liked to come on. The defenders had shot away all their ammunition, so he fought with his bare hands."

"Blick told me he heard, down in the town, that the ladies and children were hidden somewhere in a cave."

"You may be right, but I never heard anything about that."

"Isn't this old mountain honeycombed with caverns and secret passages?"

"Is it? I don't know. It's quite possible."

"His high mightiness the Marquis don't confide in you?"

"Why should he?"

Drew smiled charmingly.

"How can he help it, if he's flesh and blood? But I doubt if he is."

"I am longing to know," said Ismay, turning it off, "whether your friend and he have come to any arrangement; also, being a daughter of Eve, I want to know what in the world makes Mr. Blick want to hire land just here?"

Drew sat on the parapet smoking, and gazing at her in deep appreciation.

"Blick's a rich man," said he, "and he has an only son who is the apple of his eye. The boy's mother went down in the *Lusitania,* and the boy himself got a shock from which he can't be said to have rallied completely. The vessel that picked him up brought him to Europe. He's always been delicate; and when his father sent me over to look after him, I found his nerves were in no state to bear the return voyage. The doctors—he has seen most of the first specialists in the world—have always recommended an open-air life in some peaceful country spot——"

"So you hit upon Fort d'Olonne?"

"Well—Blick had to come to France on business, anyway; and a Brighton doctor told him the French Pyrenees and the waters at this particular spot would be ideal. Our idea is to hire a bit of the mountainside and put up a bungalow camp there for the summer, just to experiment with. I'm a doctor myself, you must know, here in attendance on Hammond. It's for me to give or withhold my sanction."

"I should have thought Mr. Blick would rather have been nearer the town," said Ismay.

"Yes, wouldn't you? He's been offered dozens of sites. But he's a queer chap, and always knows what he wants. He fell for this place the moment he set eyes on it—last week when he was wandering around here without me. He came along, out of the next valley, and

no sooner did he see the bit of hillside which they call Laz Anzeinde, than he made up his mind. These rich men get whims."

"And what does Monsieur le Marquis say?"

"Well, he wasn't enthusiastic at first. Hiring out camping-ground was not in his line, he said. But Blick is offering him a fancy price, of course; and some of these old families haven't too much cash to keep up their end with. Madame-the-old-lady can't see the place where we will build from any of her windows, so unless she's told she won't know we're there. And it ought to be the saving of the boy. Just make him over, as good as new."

"Where is he?" asked Ismay.

"At Bordeaux, so that he can be brought here just as soon as his shack's ready for him. We are some hand at ornamental shacks in the States, Miss Waldron. The materials for the boy's camp are pretty well all there. Rich neutrals have ways of doing things."

Ismay looked at him with admiration of his quaint speech, his lean activity, his air of being alert and alive to his finger-tips; and she sighed.

"I wish America was not neutral. Think of the moral effect upon the world if she stood forth to fight, with all the other free nations, against the tyranny of despotism."

"The trouble is, Miss Waldron, that there are so many folks of German blood over on our side."

"And you think those people are content to take, but not to give?"

"I don't quite get you?"

"The German-Americans have gone to the New World for wealth and freedom, for liberty of speech and thought and action—all the things denied them in their native country. America opens her arms and gives them all they ask. But when her interests, her aims,

run counter to theirs, you think they would stick a knife into her back? Even after two years of experience of what Germans can sink to, I would hesitate to credit them with such incomparable baseness."

"Well," said Drew, "that's straight talk, and you may be right. Let's hope so." He paused awhile, and repeated with emphasis, "Let's hope so."

At the moment, Blick called to him from above, and he rose with very evident reluctance.

"As soon as we're settled in," said he, "I know that Blick will just love to have you come and see us. You ought to know Hammond. Hammond's great."

"How old is he?"

"Rising seventeen, and tall for his age. His father's more than set on him."

III

THE guests having departed, with copious thanks for their entertainment, Madame announced herself as much pleased with them. To the French temperament, the facile American is always more comprehensible than the stolid Briton.

When the old lady had retired to her room, Ismay went out upon the terrace to carry indoors the rugs and chairs which she had brought out.

The Marquis joined her almost immediately, and began to help her with eager expressions of thanks to her for her diplomacy and the way she had managed things.

"Oh, but your leg! You must not!" she cried, expostulating.

His voice sounded quite irritable as he caught up her words.

"Let us hear no more of that wretched limb, if you please! It troubles me not at all nowadays. I am a normal man once more."

"You are most marvellously recovered," she admitted, feeling shy and conscious of a desire to escape.

"Of course, I know I have to thank you for this fortunate let," he said. "No doubt the hospitality, the charm of everything, clinched the bargain. Americans are very prompt—what is their word?—hustlers. I shall go down to old Jourdain to-morrow; Blick wants the contract made out at once; and the money is to be paid over upon signature. I shall have enough to clear off all my debts, to give a new roof to the stables, to put things generally in order before——" He broke off. He raised his eyes, and they looked into Ismay's, saying strange things. Perhaps he saw the fear come clouding into hers, for he finished abruptly: "Before I go back to the line."

Ismay suddenly faced the idea of his imminent departure, and saw a mental picture of her life after he had gone. As the summer waned and the evenings grew dark and cold, how could she support the long, dull hours, in company of a woman who never read, never thought, never conversed? All last winter he had been there, and they had sung, talked, read aloud, played cards. In an impersonal, inhuman kind of way they had talked a great deal.

She asked herself now what Alain would be like if they talked as man to woman? She had seen a glimpse of a new Alain, just as he, at supper, had seen her for the first time in her own civilisation, in the society of a young man with whom freedom of intercourse was the natural thing.

With an effort she brought her mind back to his last words.

"Poor Madame," she said. "Much as you are to be congratulated upon your marvellous recovery, she would be ready to pray that you might continue to be an invalid if that kept you at her side."

"Oh, no," said Alain slowly, "my mother is a true patriot; and perhaps it is lucky for me that I have no —that there is no one——"

"Yes," she replied breathlessly, "that, at least, is lucky, isn't it? By the way"—desperately changing the subject—"what did you think about what Mr. Blick was saying? Do you suppose the fragment of German I overheard was Colonel Jarriet talking to Madame Mieg?"

Alain stood for quite a perceptible fraction of time before replying. His gaze was fixed upon the ground, and when he spoke it was without raising his eyes.

"I have no doubt of its being the true explanation," he said at length, "so don't bother your head further with that. Do you——"

There was such a change in his tone that she turned to flee.

"I'm so glad! And now I must run! I have four-and-twenty *devoirs* to correct before I can go to sleep to-night. *A demain, Monsieur le Marquis!*"

Saturday was a half-holiday at the *Lycée,* and on that day, when Ismay stepped out of the *funiculaire* at the top, she found the Marquis awaiting her, in company with Dr. Drew. The two seemed on excellent terms—in fact, Alain was more animated than she had ever seen him.

"We are waiting for you," he eagerly said. "You must really come and see the miracle that has been wrought at Laz Anzeinde."

"We are commissioned by Blick, and also by Hammond, who has heard about you, to bring you back by fair means or foul," chimed in Drew.

"Hammond? Is he there?—So soon?" asked Ismay in wonder.

"Arrived last night," the Marquis told her, "and

declares he feels better already for the mountain air."

"I ask no better than to see these wonders," cried the girl; and they accordingly turned off the road, crossed the gap in the stone wall, and struck aside over the boulder-strewn flank of Mont d'Olonne.

The sun lit it all up, and drew forth the odours of the flowers which enamelled the short turf. Rare ferns lurked in shady nooks, just uncurling; and the singing of tiny becks made the silence musical.

"I for one can't wonder that Blick determined to pitch his camp right here," observed Drew presently, when they paused to admire the glorious view.

Laz Anzeinde was a comparatively level space, open to the south and west, sheltered on the north-west by a graceful little wood of larch and birch. Against this green background stood out the silhouette of a woodland habitation. The boards composing it were stained a pleasant brown, the sloping roof—doubtless of tin at heart—was covered with a tarpaulin, stretched tight and painted a dazzling white. There was a deep verandah, carpeted, and filled with blooming flowers in pots, small tables and luxurious lounge-chairs. On one side of the main building, and well in the background, was the kitchen hut. Nearer the front stood a small shack, open along one side, and revolving on a screw so that it could always be adjusted to exclude wind. It held a couch and some other bits of furniture, and upon the couch reclined a youth in a white flannel suit, who lay in an attitude of languor.

Upon sound of their approaching voices he sprang up, however, and there was little of languor in his movement as he advanced with outstretched hands to greet them.

Ismay thought she had never seen so ethereal a creature. His complexion was delicate pink and white, like a flower petal, his great blue eyes astonishing lumi-

nous. His flaxen hair rippled back from a keen, humorous face, too pronounced to be effeminate, yet irradiated with an unearthly kind of beauty.

"Why!" he cried delightedly, catching both of Ismay's hands. "Doctor Val told me you were some peach, but he didn't give me really any idea——"

Ismay uttered a laughing disclaimer. She had to laugh, for the boy was so manifestly sincere, so transparently unconscious of offence that to be annoyed was impossible.

"Well, now, Mr. Blick," said she, "if you say these things when I am in what might be called my office overalls, what will you say when you see me at my best?"

"Why, that's something to live for," he replied instantly, taking her hand and leading her to a deck-chair. "It was better for me not to get too great a shock all at once. Eh, Doctor Val? Sit down, Snow Queen! I wondered just what this verandah lacked, and I see it has been all the time simply crying out for you! Let me place your cushions. I'm an expert in cushions. There! Isn't that cunning? Lean back and let me sit here at your feet and feast my eyes on you. From henceforth that is your own chair, and I shall always see you in it, whether you are here in the flesh at the moment or no."

"Here, Hammond, ease off a moment," said Drew drily. "Other folk want to talk some."

"All right, Val, I'm nearly done, but not quite. What I was about to add, Miss Waldron, when my ruthless medico tried to shut me off, was that I am not Mr. Blick to you, please. Never to you! I am Hammond to those I love!"

Ismay surveyed him with a mixture of amazement and amusement. He sat on the verandah carpet, his thin arms about his knees, gazing up at her with a

face more vivid than she had ever seen. With his shirt open at the throat and his fair locks thrown back, he looked like a Raphael study for the head of an angel.

"You astonishing boy!" she said. "Welcome to the freedom of our mountain! I may say 'our mountain,' may I not, Monsieur le Marquis? For though I was not born in Fort d'Olonne, I have lived here nearly all my life."

"It is our mountain which is honoured by the connection," said Alain hastily; and thought with vexation how empty his compliment sounded after the boyish outpouring of an admiration as spontaneous as one might feel for a sunset or a symphony.

"It is probably your English blood and your French training," said Hammond thoughtfully, "which make you so—well, which make you what you are! I could never hope to describe the effect the sight of you has had upon me! I am plunged into——"

"Really, Hammond, if you are going to make love like this, you must wait until we are alone together," said Ismay mischievously. "You will bore these helpless onlookers to tears!"

He bent forward, snatching her hand, and kissed it two or three times.

"What you say goes," he said gallantly, "and, anyway, it's time for tea. Only one thing more—by what name may I think of you? Waldron is charming. What goes before it?"

"Oh, Hammond, it's a penny novelette kind of a name—not a good, family affair, like yours."

"Mademoiselle's name," broke in Alain, for some reason unable to keep silence, "is singularly lovely and singularly appropriate. It is Ismay."

"Ismay? I never heard it in my life. How utterly fitting that you should have a name all to yourself," said Hammond fervently. He went up to Alain, holding

out his hand. "Put it there," said he; and the Marquis, though ignorant of the idiom, obeyed at once. "I can see," continued the boy, with a sigh of pleasure, "that I am in much sympathy with the French nation. My father knew what he was about when he came prospecting here."

A white-coated Spanish servant, with an orange cummerbund, here brought out tea, and arranged a tempting meal, with American iced syrups as an alternative. Ismay insisted on tasting these, affirming her delight in any new sensation. She felt adventurous and elated, for even the outspoken adoration of a boy of seventeen is incense to the altar of feminine vanity.

"I shall have to call you Ismay," said the boy presently, as he handed her the long glass, deliciously clouded with the crushed ice it contained. "If you think it cheek, it shall be with a prefix. But I will have to use it. Surnames don't mean anything to me. I always call my doctor Val. Don't you think his name suits him?"

The Marquis spoke again, with a sigh.

"As for me, I belong to the unfortunate class who hardly ever use the name bestowed at the font. My own mother calls me Rochequisouve, which is as though she emptied a barrow-load of flints over me every time she addresses me. Do let me come into your radius, Hammond—the radius of Christian names?"

Hammond made the most charming bow, as elegant as it was evidently spontaneous.

"Marquis, you are one of the most comprehending beings it has been my lot to meet! I hardly supposed that a French aristocrat had a Christian name. I thought it was mythical, like the Queen of Spain's legs. Do tell us what it is?"

This was Ismay's chance. The Marquis had given her name, and one good turn deserves another.

"It is Alain," said she. "Do you like it? I think it charming."

In her mood of elation she ventured a glance at him as she said this, and she got another look—like the celebrated one of a few days back, only considerably more so. To hide her confusion she cried out:

"Oh, Hammond, this drink is so—so breath-taking! Hold my glass a moment while I recover!"

It was Alain who bent over her and took the glass.

"If we are going to have a brotherhood of Christian names," said he distinctly, "it must be mutual. We must all conform."

Hammond's father, who had come out upon the verandah for tea, gave a short laugh.

"You may count me out," he remarked scornfully.

"All right, father. We won't bother you," said Hammond, with keen eagerness. "But, you know, this idea is great. The movement must be formally initiated." He stopped a moment before Miss Waldron's chair and smiled into her eyes. "Ismay!" he said, as if the name were a sugar-plum, and he was tasting it. "How do you spell it?"

She told him.

"But there is a French version of it," she added. "Ismérie. Do you not think that prettier? I often wish I were Ismérie."

"So do I," replied Hammond. "Because Ismérie has seven letters in it, and so has Hammond."

"And so has Marquis," broke in Blick, regarding them all humorously over his spectacles. He had not seemed to be listening. His son ignored the interruption.

"But, on the other hand, Ismay is shorter. Now, you two others, draw in your chairs. We sit in a ring and hold hands as when singing 'Auld lang syne.' Then I begin. Ismay, am I your friend?"

"I hope so!"

"Then call me by my name!"

"Hammond! We are members of the Brotherhood of Christian Names."

"Yes. Now you must ask Val, and I will ask Alain."

Laughingly Ismay turned to Dr. Drew, and the same simple ritual was gone through, evidently much to the satisfaction of the young doctor. Then, loosing hands, Val and Hammond joined, and Alain and Ismay.

"And Alain has five letters, like Ismay," murmured the Marquis, so low that she could hardly hear him.

"Oh!" she whispered unheard, while the other two took their oath, "this is far more difficult in French."

"But why?"

"Because—you know—of the *tutoyage! Alain, que faites-vous?* sounds all wrong."

"Well, then, why?" His voice was dropped lower yet. She cleared her throat, and broke in upon what he would have said with the words of initiation in English, "Alain, are you my friend?"

To which he deliberately replied:

"De tout mon coeur. Et toi?"

Her heart gave an uncomfortable thump. She felt as though she had stepped from an easy, sandy shore plump into deep water. Obstinately she continued in English.

"Then give me my name."

He answered "Ismay" in a voice as eloquent as a caress.

It was all bewildering. She had gone through months of this young man's society with a cool steadiness which had barely the chill off. Now suddenly these crack-brained Americans were changing everything. She dared not look ahead, but determined to enjoy the moment in the care-free manner which seemed natural to Hammond Blick.

By the time tea was over they all felt quite intimate, and, leaving the millionaire busy with his note-books under the verandah, strolled away into the woods, along a path which had just been cut by his orders toward the torrent which supplied the camp with water.

"How wonderfully Mr. Blick has planned all this," cried Ismay.

"Blick has the thoroughness of his ancestors," replied Drew. As he spoke the words he glanced at Hammond, whose brow had contracted irritably; and when the boy, with Alain, was slightly in advance, the doctor said to Ismay in an undertone:

"I dropped a brick then. Hammond can't bear his father's origin alluded to."

"Was he German?"

"His father, Karl von Blick, certainly was. Hammond takes after his mother, who was my cousin. She was of good New England family—and vurry beautiful. Since the sinking of the *Lusitania* Hammond has loathed the very word German. He thinks America ought to come into the war. Say," he went on, after a slight pause, "does the old lady know we're here yet?"

"No. But the Marquis—I should say, Alain—is going to tell her. He is afraid she will certainly hear it from the servants. He will not tell her that rent is being paid for the ground, and will assure her it is only temporary. I don't think Madame will mind. You charmed her the other night. She will probably command you all before long to her august presence to take *déjeûner.*"

"I hope my patient will be able to accept the invitation after a week or so of this air."

"What a wonderful boy," said Ismay dreamily. "He takes one off one's feet a bit, doesn't he?"

Drew laughed.

"You have him at yours," he replied drily.

"Oh, but I suppose he is always like this, isn't he? How many lady-loves has he already?"

"I assure you I never saw him taken as he was to-day. You came, you saw, etc. In spite of all that enthusiasm—what some folks might call gush, I expect —he is the sincerest boy I have ever met. You have him, good and safe, in your pocket."

"If what you say is true, it makes me feel a bit responsible."

"Do all you can for him, Miss Wal——Ismay. He is far more ill than his father suspects."

"I'll do anything I can. And my *vacances* begin next week, so that I can be a great deal at his service."

"The Marquis permitting."

"The Marquis? What has he to do with it? I'm not a salaried dependant up at the château. I'm a paying guest!"

"Is that so?" said Drew, speaking rather as though he felt the fact to be of importance.

IV

ON the way home that evening Ismay felt herself desperately afraid of silence. She began talking very fast of the wonderful American boy, the iced drinks, the astonishing luxury and completeness of the arrangements so rapidly made for the camp. Alain listened, and gave necessary replies, but was evidently distrait, and at last it was not possible to maintain the one-sided talk longer, and the inevitable pause ensued. The young man broke it with words which justified her panic.

"Well, *Ismay?*"

She had decided upon the line she must take, and was ready with her barriers up.

"For pity's sake don't call me that except just when you must—at Laz Anzeinde—or it will become a habit, and slip out one day when Madame can hear you."

Alain looked angry.

"Well, and what if it did?"

"Oh, you must know how impossible it would be to explain that kind of trifling to her!"

"Trifling?"

"Yes; playing—the kind of footing on which we stand. English and Americans understand it—and you, because you are an exceptional Frenchman. But your mother would certainly dislike it."

"My mother does not dislike you—far from it."

"No; because I hope I have not given her cause. But if she thought my conduct in any respect not what she considers *comme il faut*, she might dislike me very much indeed."

He looked thoroughly disconcerted. His colour rose, his lips quivered. Like all Frenchmen, especially sons of widows, he was submissive to his mother to a degree not comprehensible in England. Before he could arrange his ideas enough to reply, Ismay had continued:

"Mr. Blick must be an astonishingly able man. Has he not done wonders in these few days at Laz Anzeinde?"

Alain, after a momentary hesitation, agreed to leave the thorny topic.

"It's queer that he chose that very spot," was his unexpected answer. "Had he consulted me, I might not have recommended it for an invalid. But I expect it's all right."

"Why, what can you mean?"

"It's close to the mouth of the caverns, you know—the pivotal rock!"

"The pivotal rock?"

"Yes. Our family name, *la roche qui s'ouvre*, cor-

rupted centuries ago into Rochequisouve. There is a rock which opens there upon the hillside."

"But this is perfectly thrilling! Why have you never told me?"

"I—how did I know that you would care?" he replied, stammering slightly. "You have never given me the chance to know you well. This boy this afternoon showed me more of you in five minutes than you have allowed to appear in all these months."

"Just so. With a boy like that—almost a child—and so delicate, poor lamb—one can let oneself go."

"Ah, yes, but not with me!" He seemed to catch back savage words he would have uttered. "But take care. You are not going back upon what you said and did an hour ago. You have taken me into the Brotherhood of Christian Names, and I shall claim my privileges."

In his excitement he stopped short upon the rough track and stood facing her. His hazel eyes, under their glisteniing black lashes, shot sparks. Suddenly she knew that De la Rochequisouve was handsome; not only so, but dangerous.

"I am not going back upon you—Alain," she said gently. "You are of the B.C.N., as Hammond has instituted it; and yet you must be aware that the whole basis of the fellowship is chaff and raillery. If you belong, you must keep the rules. And, after all," she ended on a beseeching note, "you understand well enough! I don't need to dot the i's and cross the t's when talking to you. You know well that if we begin to *tutoyer* in private, it will slip out one day in public, and for me it will be exceedingly uncomfortable. There! That's settled! Now tell me all about the pivotal rock. Where does it lead to?"

"Just a system of caves," replied the young man, after a pause, once more swallowing down his feelings

for a moment. "It is possible to travel, inside the mountain, quite a long distance, working right round the shoulder of it, and come out in the valley that overlooks Fort d'Olonne. After the Saint Bartolomé, when the castle was garrisoned against the King of Navarre, the provisions and so on all came up that way."

"You said nothing of all this to Mr. Blick?"

"Nothing at all. Why should I? He can't discover it for himself. Nobody knows the way in except myself and old Landry. When I was a boy Landry used to take me in. There's a kind of subterranean lake down there, and he made a little raft upon which we used to go over."

"And what was there beyond the lake?"

"That's the way down. You have to cross the water in order to go the rest of the journey."

"Wouldn't Hammond be tremendously interested to know all this?"

"I think we won't tell him yet. It might give him nightmares; one day when we want an adventure, we might take him in. But I expect my raft has rotted to pieces by now."

He proceeded to relate various local legends concerning the caves, and the doings of a gang of outlaws who inhabited them during the early part of the eighteenth century, and were with difficulty dislodged. The subject, to the girl's relief, lasted them the rest of the way home.

That evening he told his mother of the existence of the Americans' summer camp. Ismay could not but admire the tact and good sense with which he performed his task. He gave the news so quietly and withal so determinedly that, although piqued at not having been first consulted, the Marquise took the innovation with much composure.

In fact, Ismay went to bed that night in high spirits. Her holidays were before her, and it seemed likely that they would be a good deal more lively than had been the case the preceding summer.

The following week, however, the very eve of her holidays, brought a check to her light-heartedness. A letter arrived from the War Office summoning the Marquis to Paris. It was most probable that the Government had work for him to do, and as he was certainly well enough to do it his speedy return was most unlikely.

Ismay and he had not seen very much of one another during the last few days, for he had been spending his time in Fort d'Olonne, visiting the Jarriets, whose house, owing to the presence of the lovely Madame Mieg, was very popular among the officers of the garrison.

But the Brotherhood of Christian Names had made some fascinating plans, to begin with the first day of Ismay's freedom; and she herself was astonished at the fall of her own mental barometer when she heard of the news of Alain's departure.

He himself was obviously depressed, but evidently not surprised. His mother tried to cheer him. She had, she assured him, written strongly to the Vicomtesse la Faille, to persuade her to leave England and bring her daughter to Fort d'Olonne, so that they might both come and stay at Rochequisouve until the end of the war.

This delightful plan could, however, of course, not be carried out in a moment, and Alain might just as well be in Paris until things were arranged. If at home he would only be on tenter-hooks.

Alain's mouth went up at one corner.

"As Mademoiselle la Faille was five years old when I saw her last, the tenter-hooks are not much in evidence," he said.

"Oh, but la Vicomtesse tells me her daughter is charming! Positively wonderful! Her memory and execution are the marvel of all her teachers. She says that Thérèse was most certainly formed to occupy a high social position."

"Doubtless," replied Alain, rising from the table in the midst of his mother's speech, a thing he had never done in his life before. "I hope she will find a suitable *parti*. Why not an Englishman? They are very wealthy; I understand. And now, *ma mère*, you will excuse me, I know, for I ought to be off in a couple of hours."

What was there in her son's voice, or manner—or perhaps in her son's eyes—which turned his mother's gaze suddenly and consideringly upon Miss Waldron? Who shall say?

Ismay, in a very pale pink crêpe-de-Chine blouse, and a white drill skirt, sat leaning slightly forward in her place, her eyes fixed upon the table. Her cheeks were just the same faint shell-pink as her blouse; and to Alain's mother it came as a shock of surprise that the girl was attractive.

She could see, however, nothing that was provocative —nothing she considered dangerous; and told herself that all was well, blaming only her own want of tact in introducing the subject of Thérèse la Faille when Alain was busy and preoccupied. All the same, it would be well to be on the safe side. She decided that her son should leave for Paris without any farewell to Miss Waldron; and with that object in view, as soon as he left the room she asked Ismay to go upon an errand for her to a farm at some distance.

Ismay was slightly disquieted by the request, which seemed to suggest awakened vigilance on the part of the old lady. She felt, however, that it would be altogether wise to escape farewells, for she herself was

experiencing the most unexpected inward commotion at the thought of Alain's departure, which a week ago would have concerned her very little.

She consented readily therefore, and went off on her mission, asking Madame to offer her apologies to Monsieur, and her wishes for his safe journey.

It was an exceedingly hot day, and she did not hurry. When she returned the stable-clock showed her that the young master had been some time departed. As she stepped through the *porte-cochère* old Landry nodded and smiled at her.

"Wait a minute, my pretty," said he, turning to his little glass enclosure and searching in his desk. "Here is something that the young *seigneur* left for you, and I was to give it into your own hand, and privately. You know that old Landry has no tongue."

With that he placed a note in her hand, and again she surprised herself by the quickening of her heart-beats as she glanced at the address, smiling shyly at the old man, who regarded her benevolently through his spectacles, but ventured no comment.

In the safety of her own room she broke the seal with hands that shook a little. She had in her mind the clearest picture of Alain's eyes, and his straight, strong mouth. It was as though he spoke!

"Ismay, was this your doing, or my mother's? If yours, I may find it hard to forgive. You know as well as I that what is begun between us cannot end thus. I may be back before you look for me. Till then, I am your B.C.N. "ALAIN."

V

"I MAY be back before you look for me!"

They were words to keep expectancy on the *qui vive*.

Did Alain know why he was summoned to Paris? It sounded as though he must.

The first days of his departure would indeed have been empty without the fascination of the camp at Laz Anzeinde. Hammond and Dr. Val, each in his separate way, was an interesting study; and to them, as may be supposed, the society of a charming girl was a perfect godsend.

The Marquise fostered the intimacy with all her heart; for, pondering the train of thoughts set alight when Alain rose from the table with a brusquerie as new as it was significant, she had come to the conclusion that a solution could be conveniently found if a match could be arranged between Miss Waldron and the American doctor.

She was anxious that the whole party should come and spend a day at the château. But at present Dr. Val could not sanction so long a climb on foot for Hammond; and Ismay, who was most uncertain as to what the old lady would think of Hammond's radiant expansiveness, was somewhat relieved that the meetings for the present were confined to the camp.

If anything could have made her put the thought of Alain out of her mind it was the society of this surprising boy. He was so brilliant that, though he heaped upon her always the same extravagant adoration as he had offered on their first meeting, he never seemed to repeat himself. His health was no doubt improving, what with the glorious weather, the mountain air, and his own inward contentment. Lying on the moss, his head upon Ismay's lap, he told her she had given him the first moments of happiness he had known since the loss of his mother.

"She was the most fascinating creature the sun ever shone upon," he told her. "She was only a child when they married her to my father, or—or I don't suppose

the marriage would ever have come about. But he worshipped her, as you may fancy. He would have died for her—oh, most gladly. But he has always been so concentrated upon these great business interests of his, and he was called away upon some claim he thought essential just as mother and I arrived in New York to book our passage to Europe. When he heard that we were crossing on the *Lusitania* he telegraphed at once to forbid it. But his wire came just too late. We had started."

He went on to give her some details of that epic disaster. His mother had gone below to help some poor young woman to bring up a family of tiny children out of her cabin, and was absent just at the moment when the steward called the number of the boat to which she and Hammond were assigned.

"They called the names," said the boy, "and she did not answer, so of course I didn't. I wasn't going without her. Twice they called, and then they shouted that substitutes would be taken, and I suppose they were. When I saw the boat being lowered without us, I ran after her, calling her name, trying to fight my way through the crowd, until, to my everlasting shame, I fainted away. That's the kind of wretched weakling I am. When I came to I was in a boat of some kind, and—and that's all I know."

She stroked his hair gently.

"Well, at least," said she, "he wants you now, more than she does, don't you think?"

Hammond sighed.

"Oh, I suppose so. But he thinks more of piling up dollars than he does of me. Why on earth should he go on slaving as he does? He's rich enough. When he came over to France I thought he meant to take a rest and devote himself to me. But directly it was known he was coming over some company got hold of him to

work their interests, and he gets up bright and early, and away he goes down to the city, messing about in some bureau or other, when he might be up on this mountain-side with me and you."

"The city doesn't look, from here, as if you could do business in it," said Ismay dreamily. "It looks like a toy city; and the cordite sheds make me think of those little wooden blocks painted to look like houses in old-fashioned toy-boxes—Matchwood town!"

"Yes." Hammond raised his head from her lap to let his gaze follow her own, down through the dreamy heat.

"Can you read what is painted on the shed roofs?" he asked.

Ismay's sight was excellent, but the distance was great. Hammond produced his field-glasses, and they amused themselves by picking out the red letters and white section numbers painted huge on the corrugated iron roofs—A.1, B.1, A.2, B.2, and so on.

"What sort of stuff is cordite?" asked Hammond.

"I know, because the Marquis—Alain, I should say —took me all over the sheds one day. It is just like macaroni—not curly macaroni, but straight, Naples kind. Some is thinner, like spaghetti, and some is tiny, like vermicelli. It smells of nitre most abominably while they are making it; but it is fascinating to watch the worm-like stuff come squeezing down the tubes."

He laughed.

"I like the way you describe things—so slick. I can see that oozing stuff. Why do they make it all in separate sheds?"

"To lessen the destruction when there is a fire. Also, because it makes it more difficult to destroy from the air. You might drop fifty bombs on those scattered sheds without doing much damage. I am told they are turning out more cordite from here than from any other place in France."

"Good for Fort d'Olonne! Come, lady-love, take me for a little walk to give me an appetite for tea. Let us wander through the Enchanted Grove to the bathing-pool."

They rose, and sauntered together along the woodland path, now complete, and already ceasing to look too new, as far as the torrent, which leapt, just beyond the further limit of the trees, over a shelf of rock in a cascade like a long tress of hair.

A little scientific arrangement of the stones in the torrent bed below the fall had made a bathing-pool, not very large, but good enough. On the further side of the stream, the cliff rose high and very steep; but near its foot were many mossy boulders and natural armchairs, very comfortable for sitting. The boy and girl crossed the water, therefore, and arranged themselves in their favourite nook, known as "The Smoking Lounge."

They meant to read aloud; but the day was so gorgeous, and the silence so enchanting, that they fell into a reverie, and for some long minutes nothing was to be heard except the silky rush of the water and its babble among the stones at their feet.

Therefore an unexpected sound made them both start and prick their ears. It was an odd noise, like something very heavy scraping over stone—something between a crunch and a whine. When it ceased it was followed by other slight, indeterminate sounds—a slipping, a rustling, a panting, which showed that someone was very near them, though at present hidden from their view. Almost immediately a man made his appearance, moving round the base of a projecting boulder, and stepping carefully to avoid slipping into the water running at his feet.

They were so close, and he came upon them so suddenly, that his confusion was extreme. He looked horribly guilty—even terrified. And Ismay could not keep

back a sharp cry, for she recognised Esteban, the dishonest Spanish servant lately dismissed from the château.

The man flinched from her eyes, and turned to flee, but Hammond spoke so peremptorily that he paused, perhaps thinking it wiser to be civil.

"Do you know that you are trespassing on private property?" said the boy in fair Spanish.

"Pardon, excellency, I——"

As he stood twisting his feet together in great confusion Hammond noticed that they were bare.

"Oh, I see what you were up to—bathing in this pool?"

Esteban's eyes lit up like those of a victim reprieved.

"It is true, excellency; I came here to bathe. Down there in the town, where I am now in service, it is like the fiery furnace of the King of Babylon this afternoon."

"Hammond," said Ismay, laying a hand upon his sleeve, "I know that man! He is a thief—a dangerous character——"

She spoke in English, but Esteban evidently guessed the purport of the communication. With an ugly look he drew a knife from his belt.

"I am the victim of lies and cruelty," said he, "and now I am working and redeeming my character you want to crush me down once more. Take care, Miss English! It will take more than you and that weakling there to interfere with me."

With which he took a flying leap across the stream, and vanished down the hillside, springing from rock to rock.

"Hammond, what ought we to do? That man is after some mischief," said Ismay, and related the circumstances under which he had disappeared from Château Rochequisouve.

"We had better go back at once to camp," said Hammond eagerly; "and if father has turned up, we will tell him all about it."

As a fact, they found that both the doctor and Mr. Blick had duly reappeared; and they related the strange incident, and Ismay's unfavourable knowledge of the man.

Mr. Blick was evidently very angry.

"I thought this was a spot where one might feel really secure from intrusion," said he. "If it comes to having to set up boundary fences or post sentries, I shall have to complain to the Markee." Out came his note-book. "Give me the waster's name and full description," said he, "and if I can't get him hunted out of Fort Dolon, my name isn't Blick."

Hammond, smiling happily, patted his father's hand.

"That's dad's strong point," said he to Ismay. "He is so prompt and so thorough! No wonder they all want to get him interested in their old concerns."

It was pathetic to see the cute, commercial father blushing with sheer pleasure under his son's approving touch.

Later on, Dr. Val walked back to the château with Ismay, and found her for once an unresponsive companion. Her mind was very busily exercising itself over the appearance of Esteban. She knew, of course, that the man had not been bathing. He had merely snatched at the excuse provided by Hammond. But what, then, had he been about?

She wished that Alain, when he told her of the rock which opened, had also told her whereabouts it was to be found. Suppose that Esteban had discovered, or been told by someone, the secret of the pivot?

He might be planning a burglary up at the chateâu in the absence of the Marquis. There might be some secret underground way by which he could get in.

These were very uncomfortable thoughts. She determined not to tell Madame in case of alarming her, but to speak to old Landry, and warn him to be on his guard. There was one other thing which she could do, and it seemed to her that she ought to do it. This was, to write to the master of the château and tell him what she had seen. She had not the Marquis's address, and could not appeal to Madame for it. But Landry would surely be able to furnish it.

It was a very difficult letter to write. She must, in duty bound, ignore the letter which he had written to her, and must make it apparent that she would not have written at all but for the necessity of making him acquainted with certain facts. When she sat down to the task of composition, it proved so awkward that she would have given up the task but for one thing. Esteban had drawn a knife. In the girl's experience such a thing was horribly suggestive. It seemed to show the man as desperate and very dangerous. It drove her on.

"DEAR B.C.N. ALAIN,—A disquieting fact has come to my knowledge, and I have come to the conclusion that I ought to tell you of it. You have heard of Esteban, the Spaniard, who was here in service while you were at the front, and was discovered to be dishonest and untrustworthy? I saw him yesterday out on the mountain-side. He came upon Hammond and me when we were sitting just below the bathing-pool. His appearance was sudden, and a little puzzling. Is it possible that the pivotal rock is somewhere thereabouts, and that he has discovered its secret?

"He threatened us with a knife, and conveyed to me an impression of reckless wickedness. Hammond and I told Mr. Blick that we had seen him, and he has promised to make inquiries in the town, where Esteban, so he says, is in service. Of course I shall say nothing

to Madame of all this, and you may simply laugh at my fears. But I will own that it makes me feel a bit panicky, and I wish you were at home.—Your B. C. N.,

"ISMAY."

Letter in hand, she went down to old Landry's glass box.

"Landry, you know all about the *roche qui s'ouvre,* don't you? The seigneur told me that you do. Please tell me one thing. Is there a way up from it into the castle?"

"No, little lady, none. I do not think there ever was. I never heard of it."

She sighed with relief.

"That is well," she said, and proceeded to tell the old man of her having seen Esteban.

He listened gravely, but spoke reassuringly.

"Sleep sound in your bed, little angel," said he. "We are not all asleep on our perches, we old roosters."

Somehow this was comforting, though vague. Then she produced her letter, and asked him to address it for her. His face lit up amazingly.

"Bon! On répond enfin!" said he, with much satisfaction. *"C'est bien ça!"*

She felt herself blushing from head to heel as his humorous old eyes dwelt upon her. He chuckled softly.

"Always remember that old Landry has no tongue."

VI

THAT day the weather broke in a series of violent thunderstorms. For three days there was torrential rain, with bursts of thunder and lightning. The rocky path by which Ismay was wont to descend to Laz Anzeinde was a miry slough, impassable, and she wondered whether the light buildings of the camp would hold against such an onslaught of the elements.

Madame also was anxious; but on the second day, Dr. Val, in oilskins and sou'-wester, struggled up the hill to reassure them. He reported all well, and a plentiful supply of dry fuel, so that they had delightful wood-fires, and Hammond was as blithe as a cricket, except for lack of Ismay.

The Marquise, however, would not hear of Ismay's adventuring that day, even with the doctor's escort; and so the girl had to be content with writing her friend a long note, which Val gravely consented to carry, although it was as he said, helping his rival's cause.

Things began to mend on the fourth day, with a cold, drying wind; and on the morning of the fifth the sun shone so brilliantly that Ismay set out for the camp the moment she had finished her *petit déjeûner*, knowing that Hammond would be longing to see her.

She reached the camp before ten o'clock, but early though it was, both the doctor and Mr. Blick had gone. Hammond, just dressed, saw her coming, rushed to meet her, flung his arms about her, and kissed her eagerly and without apology.

"Oh, lady-love," said he, "I have had a fine chance to realise that it is you and you only who make the happiness and beauty of this place! What a savage and desolate wilderness it is when you are not here."

"Nonsensical baby!" said the rosy girl, teasing him. "You mean it is a savage wilderness when it rains, and an earthly paradise when the sun shines! That's all there is to it, as you Americans say. It never rained, as you may have heard, in the Garden of Eden. But how well the camp has stood it! Nothing washed away, nothing blown down."

"No, my father likes work properly done," replied Hammond, with his arm over her shoulder. "And you may tease me as much as you like—so long as you promise to stay here with me all day."

"Where is Dr. Val?"

"He was sent for by some Americans who are at Fort d'Olonne. He's by way of being a popular physician in the States, you know, and it has leaked out that he is here. He is going to refuse all cases, but my father himself asked him to make an exception this time, as it's a case of life and death. The old man took him down in the car. They felt sure you would come, and I told them I didn't care how late they came back. So we parted in bitterness."

"How tragic! It's always a woman who is the apple of contention! But I expect really Dr. Val is delighted to get you off his hands a bit, after five unalloyed days——"

"Of my sighing and lamenting for you! Quite likely! Now sit down—no not there, come out of doors, where none of these servants can overhear. I have some most exciting news for you, and I must cough it up without delay. I haven't told Val nor anybody. I've made a discovery——"

The girl started.

"Indeed!"

"Something so romantic, so exciting, so exactly in our line, that——"

"Oh, Hammond, suppose—suppose I could guess? But, no! You can't mean that! You surely haven't found—*the way in?*"

"But that's exactly what I *have* found. Why, then, you know. How did you know?"

"How did I know there was a way into the rock? Alain told me—but I don't know where it is."

"I'll show you to-day, if you'll come."

Ismay reflected, but a moment was enough to show her that this was a chance not to be neglected. She had gone to bed with terror as her mate for the past several nights, in spite of old Landry's assurance that

he was not asleep on his perch. If the pivotal rock had been found, she felt sure that Mr. Blick, if asked, would post a sentry there until Alain came home again, or have the entrance secured in some way. She therefore replied:

"I'll come fast enough. How did you discover it, Hammond?"

"In the oddest way imaginable. I feel quite Sherlock Holmes-y. You see, after you and I saw that scoundrel Esteban come creeping round the rock, I kept on worrying myself with questions as to what he was doing there. I knew he had not really been bathing surreptitiously; but if not, then why was he up there at all? What could a man, in service down in the valley there, miles away, be doing loafing around among those loose boulders? I came to the conclusion that he must have some hidy-hole thereabouts, which he used as a cache for stolen property, and I thought it would be amusing to go and see. The weather that morning looked so threatening that I guessed you would not come—at least, not until the afternoon. So off I went by myself and prowled about among the boulders. You remember the creature had bare feet when we saw him, doubtless so as not to make any scratches on the moss or stones as he crawled up and down.

"It was so easy to get up that I came to the conclusion that at some time or other stones must have been purposely arranged to form an ascent, though not an obvious one. But I got a long way up without finding even the tiniest clue. Then something caught my eye—a drop of something dark—a splash which had dried upon the stone. I took out a knife and scraped it, and then moistened it; it was sticky, and I felt sure that it was a drop of the varnish the workmen had been using in staining the boards of our huts. After that, I looked very closely, and a little way on I found

another. By that time I was about three parts of the way up. It was as though I had reached the second floor of a house, and had one floor yet to ascend. I must have been thirty feet above the stream. I was also in a recessed bit of the cliff, so that nobody could see me unless he stood exactly below the place where I was. I could not see the bathing-pool, nor the path coming out of the wood, nor anything but what was straight in front of me.

"I had been so deeply occupied in my search that I had not noticed the muttering of the thunder. It was a tremendous surprise when the rain began pattering down upon me. I was afraid of getting told off by Val if I got wet, so I looked about like a little trapped creature to see if any rock would give me shelter. You know how big some of the boulders are upon that cliff. I was standing against one as tall as myself, very nearly, and with rounded sides, so I flung myself against it, pressing hard so as to get between it and the next, and suddenly I knew that the rock itself was sort of giving way, and I tell you I had a nasty moment, for I thought I had brought down the whole thing on top of me."

"Oh, Hammond!"

"Yes, it wasn't a bit nice, was it? And then I began to realise that the stone was kind of revolving on its own axis. I had only to push, like a turnstile, and I should go right in. It made a scraping noise, with a sort of squeak in it, and of course I knew it was the same noise we heard just before Esteban made his appearance."

"Hammond, are you sure nobody was watching you?"

"Well, of course, I can't be sure, but nobody interfered with me. The only place a spy could be in would be our wood, just opposite, and I don't think Esteban

would risk that. I didn't go in, however. You see it was as black as pitch inside, and I had no light. Besides, I wanted you to be there to share the discovery with me."

"You are a perfect dear! Also you are very wise. Alain was saying the other day that he would take us both in when you were a bit stronger—and you are a great deal stronger now, are you not? Curious, he told me it would be impossible for you to find the way in alone!"

"It was just one chance in a thousand. What should have taken me up that place? Nobody would think of going there for any reason but to enter the cavern. But we have several of those electric torches, and we could take candles too. Why shouldn't we go in?"

Ismay reflected.

"Alain said nothing of its being difficult or dangerous," said she at last. "He merely said it was very extensive, and that there is a subterranean lake there."

"A lake? Oh, priceless!"

"Our only danger would be losing our way. We might take a big bit of chalk and write our initials at every place where we turn."

"Right you are."

"Esteban must have discovered it somehow while he was in service at the château. Or I wonder if he heard it from his grandfather or some aged member of his tribe? Alain said the place was a swarming nest of brigands two hundred years ago. Anyway, we are certain Esteban is using it now, and I think we ought to go and see if he has left anything there which belongs to us."

As was to be expected, they met nobody upon their way to the secret spot. The climb was, as Hammond said, not a hard one, for it seemed evident that loose boulders had been so arranged as to make ascent and

descent practicable; though this had been done so long ago that it all looked like the same mountain-side.

It was a thrilling moment to Ismay when they reached the goal of their enterprise, and, both leaning hard upon the rock, set it in motion, and smelt the dank, vault-like odour from within as the black cleft widened.

Their lights showed them an excellent rock floor upon which to step, but then arose the point as to whether to close the gap after them or not. It seemed to Ismay dangerous to leave it open. The risk of anyone passing was slight; but supposing that one of the servants should be sent to fetch them, the secret would be given away to an incalculable number of persons. Various residents in Fort d'Olonne had contracted the habit of travelling up in the *funiculaire* to call upon the Americans in their romantic camp, and on the whole it seemed both to Hammond and the girl that they ought to leave no sign of their passage.

It must be possible to open it from within, for Esteban had emerged that way. They tried, very gingerly shutting it halfway, and found it easy to push it one way as the other. Much reassured they closed it entirely, and realised that it was actually easier to open from within than from without.

This settled satisfactorily, they had leisure to look around them. They were in a rocky tunnel, whose floor had no doubt been levelled artifically, the tunnel itself having been made high enough all the way to allow of the passage of an upright man. It wound for some distance into the hill before widening out into a majestic cavern, supported upon irregular masses of rock.

There was no visible trace of the place having been in recent use. They marked their initials upon several points, and then roamed about, turning their lights into obscure corners, but without finding anything. All they did observe was a mark which had evidently been

there a long time—at about the height of a man's eyes from the ground was daubed upon the rock in paint, which had once been white, a device probably meant for a portcullis, the family crest of the Bérault.

"Our united keen intelligence," remarked Hammond, "leads us to the conclusion that this work of art is intended for a finger-post, and means that this is the passage we must pursue in order to reach the underground lake. Let us follow its advice."

They did so, for a long way, and were beginning to tire of darkness and stuffy air, when, turning a corner in the winding burrow, they came upon something which startled them more than many a horror might have done; for they were confronted by a massive door, evidently quite new, which cut off all further progress.

This door was of teak, heavily barred across and across, and fitted with expert exactness into the rock, the top of the passage having been chipped into archway form in order to fit it. The finishing touch was given by the heavy padlock which secured it.

Hammond fingered the thing thoughtfully, and whistled.

"Thus far and no farther, partner," said he regretfully.

"Are you sure it's locked?" asked Ismay in tones of acute disappointment.

"Sure enough. It's one of those word-locks, you know. You must twist the letters round to make a word." He examined it more closely. "Jove, it's a teaser! Two words you have to get, each of them with seven letters in it. I give it up!"

"Do you mean that, if we could guess the words, we might open the door?"

"I guess that's so, lady-love."

"Oh, Hammond, let us try! Do let us try! Why,

Esteban has seven letters! Try that! What could the other one be? I can't think of another."

Hammond began to move round the letters to form Esteban. Suddenly Ismay uttered a queer little sound. She recalled a scene upon the verandah at Laz Anzeinde, and Hammond saying, "I like the French version of your name, since it has seven letters, like mine."

"Hammond, I know it's silly, but just to please me! Try our names—Hammond and Ismérie."

He raised his eyes to hers with so strange a look that she caught her breath.

"Why, what can this thing have to do,"—he began. She opened her mouth to apologise, scared by something in his face, which she perceived without understanding. But he choked it back, saying merely, "Well, to please you, lady-love."

The two names were set, and the key yielded. The teak door stood open.

They dared not look at one another. Neither knew what the other was feeling. As they stood, side by side, after passing through, she could feel that Hammond was trembling from head to foot. After a tense moment he turned back, pushed the door wide, and put a stone to keep it so. Then they advanced, turned a corner, and the lake lay before them.

It was a weird scene. To their right as they stood was a wall of rock. To their left, the wall was deeply recessed into what looked like a dwelling cave, and had probably been often used as such. Before them the floor sloped sharply away, to form a huge basin about eight feet below—a basin with a perpendicular rock wall upon its right, and widening out upon its left, a lip, with a plunge beyond it into Cimmerian gloom. They could hear the trickle of falling water somewhere out of sight; and on the further side of the water was evi-

dently some fissure through which light entered, for they could see the outlines of the lake in a clear twilight.

In the dwelling cave were signs of recent use. There was a carpenter's bench, and some bits of the same wood as that of which the door was made. There was, however, no human presence. Then Ismay, staring at the water made a discovery.

"Hammond—oh, Hammond, *there's a boat!*"

Urged by irresistible curiosity they descended rude steps to the lake level. Moored to a strong staple driven into the rock was a collapsible boat, complete with a pair of sculls.

Hammond stood silent for so long that Ismay grew afraid. Then at last he spoke, in a voice unlike any she had ever heard from him. It was the voice of a man, and an imperious one at that.

"I am going across," he said.

"Oh, Hammond, haven't you done enough? Perhaps I ought not to have let you come down here at all. There may be danger. Hadn't we better go back?"

"I am going across. Please come with me. I must see what is at the other end."

She laid her warm fingers on his cold ones.

"If you go, I go," she said simply.

He pressed her hand without speaking, and they stepped into the boat.

After crossing the water they descried another portcullis marked upon the rock, and following its guidance, found themselves, at the end of a tedious half-hour, out upon the mountain-side. They emerged through a narrow slit, in front of which grew a clump of rowan trees. A spur of rock hid the valley entirely from view.

Hammond, who had now completely taken the lead, bade her go down upon her hands and knees to creep round this spur.

"Make no noise. We can't be too careful here," he whispered. "Don't speak at all, and if I lay my hand over yours, follow me silently."

Thus cautiously they crept round the spur, and she realised with a start of surprise that immediately below them lay the cordite factory, the hum of its machinery clearly audible, with the operatives coming and going in their blue overalls between the sheds.

Close to where the boy and girl crouched, but about twenty feet below them, a sentry strolled, with his back to them, his rifle on his shoulder. Ismay could not help thinking how easily she could shoot him, had she a revolver in her hand. Obeying Hammond's urging, she lay down absolutely flat before the man reached the end of his beat, turned, and approached their lair, passing it as far upon the other side as he had done previously.

She turned quite faint as she lay there, with the weight of the suspicions, the terror which came crowding to her mind. Esteban's purpose was not the inconsiderable one of robbing the château. Something far more sinister, more widespread, underlay his presence there; something which prevented her from being able to look Hammond in the eyes.

"As soon as he has passed us again, creep back out of sight," he whispered in her ear.

With infinite precaution they accomplished their retirement, crept once more round the spur, and hid themselves within the rock tunnel. Silence dropped between them—a terrible, unnatural silence, full of pain. She saw Hammond's beautiful profile, in the light of the electric torch, like some avenging angel in a picture of the Day of Judgment. He walked like one plunged in dreadful thought, and she followed meekly, longing to comfort, but feeling herself shut out.

It was not until they had recrossed the water and

reached the cave where stood the carpenter's bench that he spoke.

"This," said he, "appears to me to be the place where they are most likely to have stores. The fact of the door having been placed just here renders it pretty certain that they have nothing in the big cavern up above. Without a boat it would not be easy to reach this spot from beyond the water, and the door protects the way down. Therefore I have decided that we must search this place and see—and see what we can find."

"Hammond," she pleaded, "won't you sit down and rest first? Dear, darling boy, this has given you a shock. Won't you let me stroke your hair, and rest a bit? And I have brought some wine and sandwiches."

A shadowy smile broke over his white face, and his eyes rested on her wistfully.

"Lady-love," said he, "is it that you forgive—or is it only that you don't understand?"

"It is neither, Hammond. It is that I love you and believe in you."

He made a movement as if he would fling his arms round her, but turned away with lips set in a rigid line.

"Then help," he said hoarsely, "help to save France —and to save poor, accursed Germany, too, from one more dastardly crime to her account."

They searched the cape all round. There was but little in it; and above the walls seemed singularly free of niches or hiding-places. They examined the floor, but it was solid; and they crept a little way down the horrible slope to the left of the lake basin, but found no foothold nor any sign of its being suitable for a store-house.

It was by the merest accident that Ismay let fall her walking-stick, and that, as it struck against the side of the cave, they heard a hollow, metallic sound.

Springing to the place, Hammond rapped with his knuckles, and found that a bit of the apparent rock

came away quite easily. It was merely metal, moulded to resemble rock, and cleverly adjusted. Behind it was a cupboard, which was packed with oval-shaped objects, made of metal.

Each of these objects had a number and a letter painted upon it in clear figures, A1, B1, A2, B2, and so on.

Hammond Blick knelt down beside the pile and lifted one of the horrible things carefully in his long, white fingers.

"They are time-fuse bombs," said he at length.

Ismay said nothing at all. What was there to say? The day's happenings were slipping into shape in her mind as the bits of coloured glass in a kaleidoscope fall into a pattern.

"Hold your torch quite close, please," said the boy at length.

Ismay obeyed, and he evidently made out the maker's name, or trade mark, which was stamped on each deadly metal case.

The girl, in a passion of sympathy, saw the sweat glistening upon his deadly pallor.

"Mother, mother," he muttered, "thank Heaven you died—in time!"

Upon his agony Ismay dared not intrude. She sat silent, staring upon the grisly heap of potential death, while many everlasting moments went by. At last Hammond rose, and gazed about him as one seeking inspiration. He found it in the dark, still waters at their feet.

"Ismay," said he, "we are going to pitch every single one of these things into the lake."

"Oh, Hammond, yes—yes! Of course we must! I—I—how odd I never thought of that!"

"You stand here on the brink," said he, "and I will take them up, one by one, and pass them to you.

You will drop them gently into the water. Don't hurl them too violently."

They counted the things gravely as they tossed them, one by one, to their rest in the black waters. There were twenty-three. It was just as Hammond stooped to lift the last that they heard sounds approaching—men's voices raised in violent altercation.

The invalid's nerves, already strung to the utmost limit, seemed to collapse with the shock. The thing he held fell from his nerveless hands, rolled down the steep slope to the left of the lake's rocky lip, rebounded, and disappeared into the abyss. As it escaped his hold Hammond uttered a peculiar sound—a sound that Ismay never forgot in after life—a sound whose urgency caused her to turn and spring from where she stood, back to his side.

He clutched her tightly, in a terrible effort to speak some word. She thought it was the word "Run," but there was not time even for that before the roar of a terrific explosion crashed up from the bowels of darkness.

Something struck them—flung them to the ground like straws. So strong and squarely were they smitten that Ismay, knowing nothing of the might of percussion, was certain some enemy had rushed upon them in the gloom. She was completely stunned, and her last impression was that of the ground heaving and rocking beneath her prostrate form, while a roar and gurgle of water mingled with the deafening tumult of echoes and added to the general effect of the end of the world having arrived.

VII

WHEN the Marquis de la Rochequisouve alighted at the little terminus of Fort d'Olonne half a dozen or so of unobstrusive men in civil clothing alighted also. None

of these men had travelled in his compartment, and although he stood near the barrier, talking with the *chef de gare* as they left the station, none of them looked at him or took any notice of him.

A lady had travelled a short distance by the same train which had brought him from Paris. She was a pretty woman, fair-headed and elegant-looking, and she came up to the barrier, with a *facteur,* who carried her suit-case.

She, too, saw the Marquis, and hesitated in her advance for just a moment, as though unprepared for his being there, or desiring to avoid a meeting. It took her but a moment to realise that the situation must be faced, and she bowed graciously, but passed through the barrier without remark.

It happened that Mr. Blick had brought his car to the station, to inquire after the arrival of some groceries, which, much to his annoyance had been delayed in transit. As the lady passed through he was remonstrating with a *facteur* on the subject, in execrable French. When he saw her his annoyance passed, he smiled and raised his hat in welcome.

"Why, Madame Mieg, have you returned? This place has been indeed a desert during the past few days! But you've missed the bad weather. Shockinng thunder! Now, don't hire a *fiacre*—here's my car at your service. I came down to collect a package which hasn't arrived. Shall I drive you to the colonel's?"

"Thank you, sair. I ac-cept with plaisir," said Madame Mieg in very halting English.

Her tone was calm, but her eyes were signalling him to beware; and at the moment the Marquis approached, raising his hat with his usual grave courtesy.

Blick was glad of the momentary preparation afforded him by madame's signals.

"Why, this is a day for meeting friends," said he

genially. "We feared we had lost the Markee for some time to come."

"I am here most unexpectedly to myself, *cher monsieur,*" replied the young man. "I had hardly hoped to return in time to see madame before her departure from Fort d'Olonne." Alain's manner was most *empressé* as he bowed to the fair one. "Are you going to Laz Anzeindè?" he asked of Blick. "Because if so, I think I will beg for a lift. I have a kit-bag, and as my return is unexpected, I have not been met."

Blick accepted promptly, with a fair show of cheerfulness, and Alain at once picked up madame's suit-case, which stood upon the platform at her side, as though to carry it to the motor.

"Oh, Monsieur le Marquis, you must not demean yourself!" cried Blick energetically, snatching away the thing before Alain had done more than just be conscious of its weight.

Alain gallantly assisted madame into the car, and took his place opposite her. Politeness compelled Blick to urge him to sit beside the lady, and to seat himself in front beside his chauffeur.

Alain began to talk at once. Madame Mieg's attractions were well known in the garrison, but it had not been foreseen that they would be potent enough to make De la Rochequisouve talkative.

The car had to travel to the far end of the town, in the direction most remote from the mountains, in order to deposit madame at the colonel's married quarters; and by the time they arrived she had most certainly made the most use she could of her gifts, both natural and acquired. As the car stopped the young man was fervently pressing to be told the first occasion upon which their little talk could be renewed; and no single word had passed between her and Blick from the moment of their first meeting.

Conrad Blick, however, as he sat beside the chauffeur, had been jotting down notes in his pocket-book in his absorbed, millionaire fashion, and Alain saw a folded slip of paper pass from his hand to the lady's as they took leave. He also saw that the suit-case which the chauffeur took from the car and deposited just within the door was not the one he had lifted from the platform, though closely resembling it.

He heard Blick clear his throat nervously as he climbed into the car beside him, and could read the man's inward debate as plainly as though he had spoken.

For the first time the plotter feared that the Marquis suspected something. He was not certain, but the feared it—and time was short. Nobody up at the château knew that the Marquis had come back. Therefore, if he failed to arrive no anxiety would be felt, and nothing would be done for at least twenty-four hours, perhaps not for several days.

True, the stationmaster had seen him get into Blick's car. But, on the other hand, Blick could easily say that they had parted company at Laz Anzeinde. He was not responsible for what happened to him afterwards. A body could easily be got rid of in the subterranean lake. But murder is a desperate course; and he was not yet certain—not absolutely convinced—that the Marquis was dangerous.

The car emerged from the town, and took the mountain road. Alain was sitting so much at ease, so entirely not on guard, that the uncertainty grew. As they ascended, they passed one of the men who had arrived by the train. He took no apparent notice of the chauffeur's hooting, but merely stood aside, mopping a hot brow as the car passed. When, however, they overtook a second man, not very much further up, Blick shot a glance at his landlord, which that gentleman did not fail to interpret.

"It is unusual to pass men upon this road," said Blick. "Do they come to offer themselves as workers at the cordite factory?"

"It is likely. The Government turns out from time to time a batch of discharged men, and some of them find employment here."

"But there," said Blick suddenly, "are a couple of them—two men together on the road ahead of us, and they are too high up to be bound for the factory."

"Indeed?" The Marquis sat up. Then he reclined again. "Oh, those. They are on their way to the château—men I have engaged to work there. Perhaps you will give them a lift?"

Blick's suspicions now amounted to a certainty. Not only was he suspected, but the Marquis had taken steps to protect himself from possible foul play.

"What do you say, Hicks," he stammered, "can we add two men to our load, up this gradient?"

Hicks grinned, without turning his head.

"Six of 'em, if you like," was his sardonic reply.

"Pardon me. I had no idea that you were heavily loaded," said the Marquis in innocent surprise. "I understood that your stores had not arrived."

Blick, conscious of a blunder, watched the car slow down. The two men—they were wiry and active-looking fellows—stepped in, and they went on until they reached the nearest point of the road for the camp.

"Now," said Blick, with much apparent heartiness, "I get out here. Can I send you and your friends on higher up?"

"Thanks, no. I am coming up to Laz Anzeinde with you, if I may. I expect we shall find Miss Waldron keeping Hammond happy; and I can take her up to the château for tea."

"Capital!" said Blick genially. "You get home then, Hicks. Stay! No; it is possible I may want

you again this evening. Back your car and turn it, then go to the camp and get some tea."

"Right," said the free and independent American citizen laconically, and the four men pursued their foot.

Doctor Val met them before they reached the camp.

"Hallo! You back already, Alain! This is great!" said he, with evident pleasure. "The young people will be bucked no end to see you."

"Your patient in the pink of condition, I trust?" said Alain, as they shook hands.

"He was when I last saw him. I'm just wondering where the pair of 'em have got to. I went down to see a patient in the town this morning, and came up on the *funiculaire* to find them gone. I suppose they will be back to tea, though."

"No doubt," said Alain, pausing with some relief, and taking off his hat to fan himself as they reached the charming camp, lying in the afternoon sunshine with its gay striped cushions, inviting chairs, and seductive tea-table.

"Well," said Blick, "I'm hot and dusty. I'll go in and have a wash. Where's Esteban, Val?"

"Have you a man called Esteban?" asked Alain. "What a common name it is among Spanish servants! My mother had a man of that name up at the château while I was away. He was a wrong 'un."

"And this one's a lazy hound," said Blick shortly. "Always out of the way when he's wanted." He went into the shack, muttering, and Alain asked Val if he knew in which direction the two young folks had gone.

Val called the butler, and asked him. The man replied that they had gone through the wood in the direction of the bathing-pool.

"We might stroll that way," said Alain, standing up.

Blick, under the verandah, had awaited his man's reply, and, hesitating for a moment, came slowly back

and joined the two. He lit a big cigar as they turned their steps along the woodland path. Only his silence showed that he was in any way perturbed.

They reached the fall, and the nook which the two young ones called the smoking-lounge. It was vacant, and without the rug which was usually spread there when Hammond had used it. Keeping upon the near side of the water they went a little way on, down the stream. Then Val stopped short and pointed. Ismay's sunshade was leaning against a boulder on the further side of the torrent.

Alain's back stiffened. Some apprehension, he knew not what, ran through him. His eyes, fierce and menacing, met Blick's.

At the moment the ground beneath their feet shook as with an earthquake. A dull rumble, like thunder, boomed from the heart of the hill, and various smaller stones from the hillside crashed down into the water, sending up a fountain of spray.

VIII

THE three men went staggering for a minute, thrown off their balance, while the water, suddenly dammed, poured over their shoes. Then Blick turned upon the Frenchman such a look as one could never have supposed his cheerful, sociable countenance could wear. He was transformed in an instant into something ugly and devilish.

His hand went feeling in his pocket, while he shook the other fist at the Marquis.

"You—you——" he began, like a maniac, while Drew caught him by the sleeve, shouting:

"Blick, are you mad?"

Alain, meanwhile, had drawn a whistle from his pocket, which he blew sharply twice. The moment

Blick heard the sound he wrenched himself free from the doctor, leapt across the water, plunging and crashing, and began, with practised agility, to scale the cliff face.

Upon sound of the whistle two men emerged from the wood, and ran after him, climbing hard upon his heels; and simultaneously, from the top of the cliff, old Landry slipped down and began to descend, with the intention of reaching the pivotal rock before the German could get there. Blick was, however, too quick for him. He reached it first, flung himself upon it, and pushed and pushed like a madman.

It did not yield, however, and in another moment his captors had caught up with him, and he was a prisoner. So certain had he been of slipping through that he did not bethink himself of his revolver until just too late.

They manacled him and disarmed him with the lightning celerity of the French secret police.

"De la Rochequisouve, what are you doing?" cried Val sharply.

"Scotching a viper," returned the Marquis sternly. "And now that he is harmless, you and I will go and see whether the earthquake has done more mischief to ourselves or to his cause."

"His cause?"

"The cause of Germany."

"How dare you?" flung back the young doctor, the genius of free America blazing in his eyes.

He was interrupted by old Landry, who was gripping his master's coat.

"Seigneur, seigneur, I am afraid, I fear the worst! The young Monsieur Hammond discovered this place yesterday. I know the first thing he would do would be to take our demoiselle and show her what he had found. And look! Her sunshade upon the rocks below."

Blick uttered a howl like that of a wild beast. His boy was in there—his darling—his one hope! The devil of a French aristocrat had ordered the girl in his pay to decoy him to his death in the cavern.

"Let me come with you!" he shrieked. "Let me search for him! I shall find him! I will not attempt escape! I will give my parole!"

Alain's look was like a stab.

"We all know the value of a German parole," said he.

Rapidly he gave his orders to his police. A sufficient number of them were to guard the prisoner and be on the look-out for attacks, since it was not yet known how many of the staff at the bungalow were in the pay of Germany. The rest were to accompany him into the cave, including Dr. Drew, whose professional services might be required.

Then the seigneur turned to old Landry.

"Has the explosion caused the pivot to jam?" he asked.

"I think not," said the old man, stooping, and with pride drawing out the bit of wood with which he had wedged the stone.

"I was delayed in my arrival here this morning," he explained. "According to your orders, seigneur, this place has been watched from above, both day and night, and I have a list of the goings and comings. But this morning, just as I came on duty, Madame was not well. She had received a note which distressed her, from her friend Madame la Faille, to say her daughter was marrying an English colonel. I had to communicate with the doctor on the telephone, and it took some time. Thus I must have reached my post after our demoiselle and the young gentleman had entered. I saw Esteban go in, however, with another man called Manoel. Esteban was angry, because it appeared that Manoel should have been on duty and was not. It was then that

I wedged the stone, not knowing our young ones were within, and thinking to trap those two when they should come out."

The anxiety of Alain over his mother's indisposition must wait upon the more pressing urgency. They passed into the mountain-side.

The first part of their progress through the rocky labyrinth showed little sign of disturbance. Some masses of stone had fallen in the large cavern, but nothing that rendered it impassable. The initials scrawled in white chalk by the two adventurers were abundant evidence of the course they had pursued.

Valentine Drew was lost in wonder. The existence of the cave was a revelation to him. The teak door had been fitted since Alain's departure. It was open now, and across its threshold lay two dead men, pinned down by a mass of rock upon their chests. They were horribly mangled, but their heads were untouched, and the purple, swollen countenances recognisable. They were Esteban and Manoel.

The hammering of the rock which had been necessary in order to make the door fit had, no doubt, loosened the adjacent portion of the tunnel roof, so that the shock of the blast caused it to fall, or shook it down at once.

It was a horrible task to clamber over the bloody pool upon the floor, and the mass of dislodged limestone, which was nearly as high as their heads. They were forced to do it, however, and they passed through into the place where the carpenter's bench stood, and on to the verge of the lake.

As they emerged from the pitch dark into the twilight of this part of the cavern, Alain and Landry simultaneously gave a cry.

The lake had disappeared. The bomb had cloven its rocky lip, and almost all the water had drained away.

There, upon the ground, sat Ismay. Hammond's head lay on her lap. His limbs were outstretched, almost as though he slept. No sign of hurt or violence was visible upon his face or limbs.

Ismay started as the voices and steps approached her, and looked up blankly, as though she had not expected to be disturbed.

"Hush!" she said. "Please be very quiet—very reverent. I do not like to see you with your hats on"—all the men uncovered simultaneously, like automatons—"because he is dead. They knocked him down. They knocked us both down. I could not see who did it. But he—he did not die in time. He says his mother did. She did not live to know his father was a criminal. But, you see, the name was printed on the bombs, and so he could not help knowing. I think he is glad to be gone. I have asked him to come back to me, but although he speaks very low, and I can hardly hear what he says, I think he is telling me that he does not wish to come back."

She poured out these words rapidly, in a monotone, staring straight before her, her body inclined over the boy as though guarding him from interference.

The doctor, pushed forward as by common consent by the others, went and knelt down at her side.

"Ismay," he said firmly, "don't you know me? Don't you know Val?"

She looked up then, her eyes dark and tragic in her white face, no trace of the turquoise colour visible.

"Did you help to hide the bombs there?" she asked. "I am glad to say that was the very last one—the one he let fall. We heard Esteban coming, and he was startled. But it was the last. All the others were spoilt. We threw them in the lake. Wasn't it clever of him to think of doing that?"

With a murmur of pity Drew leant over her and

made as if to shift Hammond; whereupon she cried sharply:

"No! No! Leave us! We are happiest like this. We will wait here until—until"—her voice wavered—"until somebody comes home. I have written to tell him to make haste."

Upon these words Alain, who had been fighting emotion, came forward. He put the doctor aside and bent over her.

"It is all right, love. I have come," said he in her ear, his voice so choked with feeling that it was hardly recognisable.

As he spoke he lifted the dead boy's head and shoulders from her lap, and, with Val's help, removed him to a little distance. She made no objection at all. Her face now wore the expression of one who thinks she hears the sound for which she has long been waiting—the beat of the hoofs of her lover's steed.

De la Rochequisouve put firm arms about her, raised her from her cramped posture, drew her to her feet, and held her supported against him, whispering in her ear things which he hardly knew he felt—tenderness which flowed from his tongue almost without the action of his will.

"Alain!" she cried in a tone of wonder, of joy, of exquisite relief, which set his heart pounding. She pushed him from her with both hands that she might look up in his face and make sure. Then she dropped her forehead on his shoulder and the tears came. "Now I am safe, now it is all right," she faltered; and Alain repeated softly:

"All right, all right, Ismay, *bien aimée.*"

Landry stood by with glistening eyes, which he wiped on the back of his hand.

"The courageous children! So they threw the bombs into the lake."

"They were but just in time, Landry. The remaining bombs came in on the train to-day, and the affair was planned for to-night."

"Have you got the woman, too?" asked the old man fiercely.

"Safe enough. She was to be arrested at once, after I left her this afternoon. She had a dud suit-case given to her in exchange for the one she brought, which was left behind in the car and carried up here to the camp. Rateau, you found it, I suppose?"

"Yes, *mon capitaine*. We have it and its contents."

"I do not believe," said Alain, "that the Jarriets are implicated at all. It was all planned between Blick and the woman."

Valentine Drew broke in.

"For pity's sake," said he, "help me to carry my boy out of this. How can I tell if he is really past help until we have him in the fresh air?"

. . . . .

They paused upon the edge of the wood, laying down Hammond upon the emerald turf, while Drew tried all that skill or science could suggest to make the heart and lungs respond. It was vain, as from the first they had felt it must be. The buffet of the driven air had been enough to beat the frail life from its habitation.

But Ismay always maintained that he died of a broken heart.

As for her, she lay for some time after her rescue propped against the shoulder of her lover, while old Landry bathed her face with the ice-cold water of the torrent and made her drink some wine—his panacea for all ailments.

Presently she whispered, venturing to raise her eyes:

"Alain, how did you know about Mr. Blick? When did you begin to suspect?"

"I began to suspect when you gave me the fragment

of a German sentence which you had overheard," he replied. "That meant nothing to you, but much to me. Then, when Blick came asking to rent land immediately after, I began to put two and two together. But it was not until I went down myself one day into the cave, and found that someone had been there quite lately, that I felt positively certain—certain enough to go and lay information before the Government. And your letter, telling me you had seen Esteban near the bathing-pool, supplied the final link."

She broke off in her eager questioning, because Val Drew had risen to his feet, and stood with anguished face gazing down upon the figure of the dead boy. He had crossed the hands over the breast.

Ismay unclasped her hands from Alain's and crept close to the still, monumental figure, which somehow looked like an allegory carved in marble.

"Ah, Hammond, pure, darling soul!" she sobbed, as she kissed the cold lips. "You are the first martyr for freedom's cause from the other side of the Atlantic!"

"Martyr! Ay, that he is!" cried Drew bitterly. "Oh, it is too horrible! De la Rochequisouve, tell me, you are not supposing that the United States is fairly represented by men like Conrad Blick, are you?"

"No, indeed—*Val,*" was the reply, and the expression of the young Frenchman's eyes, as he held out his hand frankly, was balm to the doctor's wounded soul. "I should indeed be a cur if, in face of this splendid boy's martyrdom, I could believe anything but the best and greatest of great America. But something tells me that the days of her neutrality are almost run. An affair like this helps to bring the crisis nearer. When America stands forth to help the world, along with the other great nations, she will know how to deal with her own Conrad Blicks. They will learn what we have learnt here in France, that 'once a German always a German.'

And there will be no prouder man in France than I when it is given me to grasp the hand of our great Ally in the West."

II

IT BEGAN WITH A WEDDING

I

THE church was crowded, for the Bowdens had a large circle of acquaintance; and even though war-weddings are rather a drug in the market, everybody felt they must come and see Chrissie married.

There was to be no reception; for it was not more than six months since the bride's brother was killed in action. Various members of the congregation had been informally bidden to repair to the house after the ceremony, to wish the young couple God-speed.

The seats assigned to the bridegroom's friends were but sparsely occupied. In one of them sat a woman whose attire and general air of eccentricity made her noticeable. She leaned over the front of her pew towards a man of the same species—a man with a lean face, a saturnine mouth, and half-closed eyes which saw everything.

"Hallo, Blitz," murmured she, "the sight of you here is as incongruous as it is refreshing. For pity's sake, tell me what Rolf is doing in the camp of the Philistines?"

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"Imperilling his immortal soul, I should say, by taking vows which there is not the smallest chance of his keeping," said he, speaking more seriously than was

his wont, as could be seen from the glance of aroused attention flung at him by Miss Jane Lockett.

"Then it was true," she murmured, "what they were saying about him in Paris?"

"I haven't a notion what they were saying about him in Paris."

"That he had been badly turned down by Eleanor Carmichael."

"As a matter of fact, I happen to know that that is true."

"Were they engaged?"

"They became engaged at my studio, when Rolf last was home on leave. She broke it off about two months ago."

"Do you know why?"

Evidently Blitz did. He hesitated a moment. "They quarrelled," he said presently.

"On account of this girl—the bride?"

"Lord love you, no!—Well, if you will have it, because Eleanor was flirting furiously with Max Ritter."

"Max Ritter! I thought he was interned?"

"So he was. But not for long. Got a Member of Parliament to go surety for him. Well—you know Rolf Holderness. It must be all or nothing with him. He sent her an ultimatum, and was handed the order of the boot by return of post."

"And this is the result? Oh, Blitz, it's bad, it's bad! What kind of a girl can this bride be? What's she about, to take such a deadly risk?"

The man shrugged his shoulders in a hopeless kind of way.

"Rolf got back to England on leave yesterday, and *went to see Eleanor on his way from Waterloo.* If he hadn't found Max there, I believe this wedding would never have come off."

"Do you suppose the other girl knows?"

"I shouldn't think she's ever heard of Eleanor. Have you seen her? I caught a glimpse of her once when he was last on leave, before any of this happened. She's so young that, if she were one minute younger, she wouldn't be born at all."

"Oh, Blitz!" sighed Jane once more.

Two elderly ladies seated near turned round and glared upon the two who talked in church. Almost at the same time, Rolf Holderness, followed by a friend in khaki, came out of the vestry and took up his position at the chancel gate. He was absolutely white —so white as to be livid; and Jane could hardly repress a groan. The choir boys broke into "The Voice that breathed o'er Eden" and little Chrissie came up the church on her father's arm. Her wistful eyes looked unnaturaally big, set off by her dark curls and the white folds of tulle which floated over her shoulders, finished in front by a tiny garland of white buds. The two artists who looked on were simultaneously reminded of a lamb that has lost its mother. She wore the conventional marriage garb, but there was something in her face which was far from conventional. Her brown hair was warm with rich bronze light; her eyes so dark a grey that at night they might have been black. The tint of her skin was lovely, a golden-white; and her nervous excitement had brought a flush of delicate carmine to each cheek.

The service was soon over, and the irrevocable accomplished. The time occupied in signing the register was very brief. Soon the pair were coming down the gangway of the nave, and acknowledging the greetings of their friends.

The stony misery of Rolf's expression was not, to most of those present, a thing to wonder at. The majority of British bridegrooms hide a very real satisfac-

tion under a like mask. People merely took him to be nervous. But, as he approached the place where the tall, gaunt man whom Jane Lockett called Blitz stood with folded arms, a light dawned upon the blankness of his well-cut features.

"Blitz, old man, this is good! Miss Lockett too!" He bent towards the girl on his arm.

"Chrissie, this is my friend Blundell—a great man—we studied together under Levargue in Paris; and this is Miss Lockett, who always gave us breakfast in her studio when we had no money left."

The usual greetings appropriate in the circumstances were interchanged; and the little bride shyly suggested that Mr. Blundell and Miss Lockett should come to Cadogan Crescent and help to cut the cake.

With the idea of making things easier for Rolf, they both accepted, in spite of their reluctance to enter the camp of the Philistines; and Holderness, pleased and a little surprised at their compliance, passed on.

As they reached the last row of seats, in the shadow of an old gallery, two people who had been seated there rose and came up to them.

Chrissie felt her husband start as he came to a standstill; and there faced them a tall woman with large, vague, blue eyes, and a mouth fuller than is usual in the English type of beauty. Her throat was long, white and columnar like a Rossetti picture, and her golden hair drifted under her oddly shaped hat and into her eyes. To the Bowdens' acquaintance, who filled the church, she was like a caricature, but she had a subtle beauty which, in the eyes of many men, was only enhanced by the extravagance of her style.

"A thousand felicitations, Rolf darling," said she softly; and the man at her elbow smiled—detestably as Chrissie thought—and echoed—

"A thousand felicitations."

"Hallo, Ritter! Have they let you out?" said Rolf, his usually kind voice so charged with venom that Chris started.

"Let me out? You speak as if I had been doing time," was the light response, to which Holderness swiftly retorted:

"Well, haven't you?"

"Rolf, forget old grudges on the happiest day of your life," said Eleanor Carmichael earnestly, showing flawless teeth inside the brilliant rose colour of her moist lips. "Max, as you must know, was only interned by mistake."

"A very natural mistake," flashed back Rolf smoothly. "Let me introduce my wife—*Herr Ritter*——"

A menacing darkness passed over Eleanor's blue eyes, but she was evidently not going to lose her temper. "Your husband was always droll," said she to the mystified Chrissie. "Since when has Max become Herr Ritter, Rolf?"

"Since August, 1914," snapped Rolf. "Come, Chrissie."

Eleanor pushed him back, grasping the bride's hand.

"I haven't so much as spoken to her," she cried protestingly, "and I want her to promise to come and see me when your leave is over, and she is left all alone."

"Oh, she won't be alone, she has plenty of friends," was the barely civil reply, and Rolf moved onward with determination as he spoke. The congregation had now left their places, and were surging behind them into the gangway, so no further words were possible.

A moment later the newly wed couple found themselves in a brougham with a pair of horses, being driven back to Cadogan Crescent.

II

CHRISSIE was the youngest of the three Miss Bowdens, and the quiet one.

She was but eighteen when war broke out; so she had, as it were, missed her girlhood. No balls, no trips abroad, no Oxford Commemoration such as her sisters had had. One of her brothers had fallen in the struggle—her own specially beloved brother, Sid.

It was Sid who had brought Captain Holderness to the house in Cadogan Crescent.

Rolf Holderness belonged to the vast class of patriotic young Englishmen who volunteered the moment war was declared, in spite of being totally unsuited to a military life. He was a painter of real ability and was beginning to make a name for himself. He disliked the army routine and was out of sympathy with the cheery young Philistines who were his fellow officers.

Sid Bowden was the only one with whom he made friends; for Sid, besides being a Philistine, was a wit; and his unflagging hilarity had carried Holderness through some bad bouts of depression.

The two young men, by an unusual accident, got leave simultaneously; and, as Holderness's people were in Spain, he received a cordial invitation to come to Sid's home.

When he came, he was a good deal disconcerted by the frank, Victorian obviousness of the whole household. Mrs. Bowden and her daughters made surgical dressings, washed the dishes in canteens, and acted as V.A.D. nurses. Chrissie, at the time of Sid's leave, was, to her own joy, taking a vacation by doctor's orders, as the result of over-work. Upon her therefore devolved the duty of "amusing the boys," and she found

Holderness, though handsome enough to fascinate her, very hard to interest.

An officer who loathed revues, and could not see the fun of having tea at the Piccadilly, was a genus to which she was so far quite a stranger.

He went out by himself a good deal, having friends in town. Somehow Chrissie gathered that he did not introduce his friends to her people because he knew the two sets could not fuse. Holderness was quite polite always, but Chrissie was constrained to believe that it was an effort to him to seem interested in the family, and that his thoughts were often far away.

He made enough impression upon her inexperienced heart for her to be very anxious to get on better with him. She tried to take an interest in pictures; but she was much cast down at finding that Holderness loathed those which she admired, and *vice versa*. There was a large photogravure of "The Soul's Awakening" upon the dining-room wall in Cadogan Crescent, flanked by one of Miss Gooding's pictures, in which various infants in long petticoats were posturing aimlessly about like an advertisement for a children's outfitting establishment. In a moment of expansion, Holderness did confide to the large-eyed, eager little simpleton of a Chrissie that he had manoeuvred to sit with his back to these works of art, because the sight of them took away his appetite.

Often, after his departure, she wondered why.

They had, in her opinion, made no progress at all in intimacy when he returned to the Front. In fact, during the last few days of his stay he had seemed altogether distrait, and as if he hardly knew whether she was in the room or out of it. But when he was leaving, he thanked her for being so good to him, and said he would appreciate a letter now and then.

Chrissie was willing enough to comply. In conse-

quence of repeated bad colds, she left off V.A.D.-ing that spring, and took to making socks and slippers and sandbags, which could be done indoors. This left her a little leisure and she employed it in studying such works of art as the fear of air raids has left visible in London. To her satisfaction, she found her own standards of criticism beginning to change. Bitter phrases, let drop by Holderness, clung in her memory and served for guides. She read "Modern Painters"—how horrified Rolf was, when she told him so in a letter!—But in spite of his scolding, the burning words of Ruskin did open a door in her intelligence. They taught her actually to see the things she looked at; and she began to develop.

It was soon after this that Sid was killed. Holderness was with him to the last, and wrote letters to the Bowdens which showed him at his very best—manly, sympathetic letters which were more comfort to the starving heart of Sid's little sister than even her brother's being mentioned in despatches.

Another six months rolled by; and, then, out of a clear sky, as it were, fell the bombshell of a surprise. Holderness wrote, saying that in a few weeks' time he should have a fortnight's leave. Would Chrissie marry him, as early in the fortnight as it could be arranged?

"You were always a good little pal," he wrote, "and I feel that I badly need a pal just now. I think Sid would be very pleased—don't you?"

Chrissie was utterly astonished; but it appeared that her family were not.

"Always thought he was sweet on you," remarked her sister Connie, "a man like that loves someone who listens to him with her soul in her eyes, as if he were a chapter out of the Bible."

Thus reassured, Chrissie wrote and said "Yes."—"I

was surprised," ran her innocent reply, "I always thought you looked upon me as a little duffer. I used to feel so silly, somehow, when you were here. But I am really not quite so empty-minded as I was. I have read every book on the list you gave me, and some of them I have liked very much, though in each of them I have only understood about a quarter."

After that, things rushed onward as a stream approaches the cataract. Letters between the betrothed pair were chiefly occupied with discussions as to the date of the wedding, where they should spend their brief honeymoon, and what should become of Chrissie when Rolf went back to France.

The actual return of the bridegroom, though it found most things prepared by the capable Bowden family, found the bride quite unprepared.

She had altered considerably since Holderness last saw her. The death of Sid—her joyous, rollicking Sid—had left a deep wound in her affectionate heart. Joined to this was her mental development, under the guiding influence of a love so shy that it might be better described as an intellectual admiration.

When the day of Rolf's return was as certain as the vagaries of the War Office permit, she worked herself into a fever of suspense. She and her sister Constance went to meet the leave train, waited two hours at the terminus, and missed their man in the crowd. They hurried back, thinking they might find him there, but he had not arrived at Cadogan Crescent; and they were actually discussing the propriety of sending out notices that the wedding was postponed, when he made his appearance, between eight and nine o'clock in the evening. He seemed vexed that they should have attempted to meet him, and said he had been obliged to go and see his lawyer about his will, the marriage settlement, and so on.

Chrissie was herself in such an agony of nerves, and so wrought up, that she had no leisure to judge his mood. He talked more, she thought,—faster, and in a harder voice than she remembered; but he owned to being dead beat, and said he should not feel like himself until he had had a good night's rest.

Mrs. Bowden did not think it *comme il faut* that he should stay in the house itself, and had taken him a room in a hotel near. It seemed to Chrissie that he had hardly greeted them all, and discussed arrangements a little, than he excused himself and went off to "sleep it out"; making an appointment to turn up at eleven the following day—the only one intervening before the wedding—to take Chrissie to buy a ring and make some other purchases.

This appointment he duly kept, and was shown into the dining-room, where he found Chrissie alone, busy unpacking some gifts which had just arrived.

The display of these to him, and the effort to make him understand whence they came, tided her over the first shock of awkwardness; but after a few minutes she was left hanging, as it were, in the wind—longing for some word from him that might unlock the gates of her maiden aloofness, and give her an excuse to tell him how dearly she loved him.

Rolf himself broke the pause. He had been sitting for some minutes in absorbed contemplation of "The Soul's Awakening." Suddenly he turned and spoke, but without looking at Chrissie.

"Well little woman, we haven't got time to make friends, have we? Still less to make love? We must wait until we are—until we are together, and then begin at the beginning. I—we—it has struck me, don't you think we had better go and take rooms at the Metropole, and—see if we can get a couple of stalls at the 'Garrick' for to-morrow night? That will save travel-

ling, which is beastly just now, and of which I've had all I want. We won't tell anybody what we mean to do, nor where we are going—eh?"

As Chrissie remained silent, he looked up to mark the effect of his words. She sat simply enough, the other side of the big dining-table, gazing upon him.

"Is that what you would like to do?" she asked.

Rolf suddenly knew that she was a little changed. It was not the pretty flapper he had left, but a graver, older, more reflecting Chrissie; he was not quite sure of liking the change.

"Oh, of course it must be a question of what *you* want to do," said he quickly. "Only give me an idea——"

"Really, I don't think we can improve on yours."

"Honest?"

She nodded. Tears were so near that she could not speak; but of this he had no inkling.

"Then that's settled." He stood up with an air of relief. "Trot along and put a hat on, won't you?"

So they went shopping, and bought a ring—much too full of big diamonds to please Chrissie, but she dared not say so, seeing that Rolf assumed it to be the kind of thing she must admire. Her general impression of the day was that she slipped farther and farther away from him until the distance between them seemed actually formidable.

Since her engagement, her innocent head had been so full of dreams of him that he had seemed quite near —human, approachable and dear. Now that he was there in the flesh, the old uncomfortable feeling that he and she had different standards and a different outlook was growing acute.

She was, however, too utterly inexperienced, too entirely the creation of her up-bringing, to have any

doubts as to the central fact of his love for her. He had asked her to be his wife—more than that, his "pal." His ideas of a pal seemed at present a trifle chilly; but she ascribed all to her own ignorance of the thing he sometimes obscurely alluded to as "life." She would have preferred it if his notions had been more primitive—if he had hugged her tight and called her his darling, she would have been reassured at once. That he did not do so was to her just one more indication of his "temperament"—a thing she did not in the least understand.

The man's mind was too preoccupied with its own bitterness to note the pathetic appeal of her eyes. He saw only her resolute outward tranquillity, and assured himself that so shallow a little person as his future wife would not suffer, whatever might be the case with himself.

That evening there was a family gathering, so the lovers had no time to themselves. The well-meant facetiousness, the platitudinous remarks, the general "Bromidism" of the Bowden set, was a genuine ordeal to the bridegroom. And Chrissie saw how alien to him was the general tone and manner of her set—her kin —those among whom she had been brought up.

. . . And in spite of it all, the suicidal nature of the venture she was making did not once present itself to her fully, until she found herself, just half an hour too late, face to face with Eleanor Carmichael.

III

In the drawing-room at Cadogan Crescent, husband and wife stood under a canopy of flowers from Uncle Joseph's conservatories at Surbiton, and shook hands with so many people that the statement that no invitations had been issued proved to be the merest con-

vention. Mr. and Mrs. Bowden and their sons and daughters had invited everyone with whom they shook hands at the church to "drop in for a minute" and the response had been almost universal.

Her new light upon the situation enabled Chrissie to see that the absurdity of the floral canopy was a thing hardly to be borne by her husband in his present mood. Her own perception of his feeling turned her almost sick. She saw, with the insight which love, fully awakened, can bestow, that to be made ridiculous is little to a happy man, but sheer exasperation to a miserable one. She grew quite faint with the strength of her own sympathy for what he was undergoing. Turning her white face to his, she whispered hastily:

"Try to bear it a few minutes more, please—just until Uncle Joseph and Aunt Matilda have come upstairs. I will make an excuse then, and we will move before your friends arrive——"

He gave her a quick glance, more friendly than she had seen on his face since his return from France.

"Good kid," he said under his breath. "All right, I'll try to stick it."

Therefore, when Blundell and Miss Lockett walked in together, the bridal pair had cut their moorings and were drifting among the guests.

Blundell was nearing five-and-thirty. He was already a painter of note. He owed his nickname to his lightning bursts of rage and irritability. But there was no trace of either as he stood before the little bride and let his gaze plunge down into her pleading eyes.

He thought it was like peering into a clear pool full of water-plants, wherein thoughts, like gold and silver fish, darted to and fro, hiding among the thick vegetation, visible only by fits and starts . . . depths, surely, to repay the careful explorer?

"I say," he began, "ought not you two to be standing under that canopy that smells so sweet? How the modern married couple does miss its opportunities! Why, man, you'll only be married once—or twice if you are unlucky—and for this one hour you are the centre of attraction! If I were you I'd take the limelight while it's turned on full."

"Since when have you cultivated a taste for limelight, Blitz, old man?" cried Rolf.

Blitz fixed those visionary eyes upon the curve of Chrissie's chin.

"Some chaps never know their luck," he said softly. "If I might be in your place, and stand up as the hero of this occasion with—with Mrs. Holderness at my side—I can assure you I'd take my chance."

Rolf flashed a startled glance at Blitz, who did not pay compliments. He heard the ring of conviction in his voice and looked at his wife's face as it were with new eyes. The picture which had floated between himself and any perception of his bride—the picture of Eleanor's red mouth, pursed for his passionate kisses—faded for the moment as Blitz's words jolted him out of his mad dream of regret.

He saw Chrissie smile up bravely at Blundell and reply lightly, "Mr. Blundell knows how to compliment, does he not?"

"Give me a reward, then—let me take you to have some champagne, for you look very pale," replied the artist promptly.

Chrissie assented at once and went off with him. She thought that her pilot contrasted with the other men in the room as a portrait of Vandyck might show up in a collection of modern Royal Academy portraits. In fact, he was like a portrait by Vandyck, and wore his chestnut beard in the mode of the seventeenth century. That Chrissie realised this is some indication

of the artistic distance she had travelled in the past months.

"It is a particular pleasure to me to have some of Rolf's friends here," she said eagerly, "for you see I hardly know any of them. His mother and sister are in Spain, and they are not allowed to come over, on account of the U-boats."

"Shall you remain in London when Rolf goes back?" asked Blundell, as they stood sipping Mr. Bowden's excellent champagne; and when he gathered that she was fairly sure that she would, he eagerly invited her to his studio. "I should like to paint you," said he in his blunt way, though with a tinge of gentleness which few persons called out in him. "Wouldn't it be a surprise for Rolf if I were to do him a portrait of you, all unbeknownst?"

Even as he made this incredible offer, he could see that she had simply no idea at all of the favour he was extending.

"He would like anything that *you* painted, I suppose," said she dubiously. "He is terribly disdainful of our inartistic house."

At that moment, Holderness himself arrived in the dining-room, escorting Aunt Matilda. Blundell gripped his arm and repeated to him the suggestion he had just made. Not only Rolf, but also Jane Lockett, who was standing near, looked positively awe-struck.

"I haven't given you a wedding-present. Let me give you a portrait of your wife," said Blundell; and Chrissie, to her amazement, saw her husband positively stammer as he tried to voice his thanks.

Mr. Bowden at the moment fussed past, intent upon providing refreshment for an overfed dowager who badly needed rationing. Chrissie stopped him and introduced the two artists. Blundell's name was big enough to be known even to the possessor of "The

Soul's Awakening," but he responded not merely with politeness, but with a due sense of the condescension of the lion, whose recent refusal to paint the wife of a very great financial magnate was the talk of the season.

Just as they were discussing the point, and Rolf was searching his wife's face with serious eyes to find the key to Blundell's sudden enthusiasm, Connie and Edna Bowden came to claim their sister, and led her away for the purpose of changing her dress.

In pursuance of Rolf's idea that nobody should know their destination, he had ordained that they should take their departure at four o'clock, as if to catch a train; so Chrissie went off obediently with her bridesmaids, leaving her husband still in talk with his friends. Then there was a loud knock at the house-door, and everybody said:

"Another telegram! They must have had *dozens!*"

This telegram was addressed in full to "Captain Holderness, 10th Wessex." Rolf therefore opened it forthwith; and his face changed.

"What is it?" cried his father-in-law, anxiously gazing at his disturbed countenance.

"My leave—my leave cancelled," replied the bridegroom limply. "What the dickens am I to do now?"

"Leave cancelled?" The fatal words were caught up, they swept round the room in an eddy of dismay.

"His leave's cancelled! Poor beggar! Got to report at Waterloo to-night at seven o'clock."

Rolf stood still, staring at the floor, that the news might really have been to him the staggering blow that everyone assumed it to be. How could they tell the gladness, the unfeigned relief that flooded him? . . .

. . . He had taken his revenge upon the woman who had jilted him in order to whistle him back at her own time; and, for the present at least, he need not pay the price.

For a few minutes this was his only thought, ousting all consideration for the child upstairs. What recalled him to the consideration of her was a chance encounter with the keen eyes of Blitz, which seemed to probe his very soul. He drew a deep breath, pushed back his hair, and said, suddenly and sharply:

"Wait, everybody! My wife is not to be told!"

Everybody paused. "Not to be told?"

"Only by me," he replied. "Please let her finish dressing undisturbed, and send her to me in the morning-room—alone."

Blundell stepped forward, took him by the arm and led him apart.

"What can I do?" he asked. "Where are your things?"

Rolf collected himself. "The Metropole. We were going there. We must still go, and I must repack all my kit. Will you call there for me, at six-thirty, and take me to Waterloo? She—she mustn't come."

"I will. Poor little girl—poor, innocent, unfortunate little girl! Who could have foreseen that fate had a bludgeon like this in store for her?"

"Quite a mistake, Blitz. God's looking after her," muttered Rolf between his teeth. "He's . . . keeping her safe. Most likely I shan't come back. Of course the cancelling of that leave means that we're going into action at once. If—if I'm careful—I may be able to keep her illusions unbroken."

"Try, at least," said the other man. His voice was severe.

Rolf eyed him swiftly. "You think me horribly to blame?"

"I think you've acted devilishly. Were there no other girls—just ordinary girls—who would have served your turn, without setting your heel on a lily of the valley and grinding it into the dust?"

Chrissie's husband drew himself up and opened his mouth to retaliate; but there was a murmur on the staircase:

"She's coming down."

She came.

With a haunting idea of his likes and dislikes, she had insisted upon an artistic "going-away" dress. Blundell got an impression of soft, faint blue, with grey in it like a misty sky, and a hat with curves which were just right.

The bridegroom, wide-eyed, awaited her at the foot of the stairs. The message of his eyes told her a great deal without words. He laid his hand upon her arm. "Come this way, Chris."

The guests, some frankly in tears, most of them with a lump in the throat, made their adieux and hurried away, that the unlucky young couple might not have the ordeal of facing them when the fatal news had been disclosed.

The door of the morning-room closed upon the two, and when they were shut in, Rolf stood before her, taking both her hands. For a moment he said no word. Then, dropping her hands, he gripped her by her slight shoulders.

"Chrissie, pull yourself together. I have something to tell you . . . it's bad news."

She turned perfectly white, but held herself firm and upright in his hold. She gave a big gasp, like the bursting of some barrier within, and cried out:

"I know what you have to tell me! It is that you have found out your mistake!—Or—or perhaps that you're sorry for it—sorry for me! Since you saw Miss Carmichael again, face to face, you feel you can't face life—with me! . . . Oh, I'm glad you know it! Of course I saw, the moment you came home, that there

was something dreadful—something wrong—something that *wasn't there!*"

For a moment this wholly unexpected analysis of the situation so bereft him of breath that he forgot to open his mouth to deny it. But by the time she had done, he felt a mad gratification that he could give her so different a reason.

"Chrissie, you're mistaken—you're utterly mistaken! It's nothing of the kind. It's—it's this. Just come. Better read it."

She took the telegram from his hand; and after reading, said nothing for a moment. Then she smiled pitifully with one corner of her drooping mouth. "This is very fortunate," she said slowly. "I congratulate you."

"Chrissie! What are you saying?"

"I am telling you what you have never told me—the truth."

"Chrissie! Don't you believe me?—That I——"

"—That you care about me? I know you don't. Ah, why did you lead me into this terrible affair? It was very cruel. I had never done you any harm."

It was not until long after this shattering interview that he reflected upon his own lack of surprise at her unexpected insight. He uttered no protestations. He answered with the candour which he felt that her tragedy gave her the right to demand.

"I turned to you when I thought my heart was broken. I suppose I felt that—with you—I might pull myself together again, and—and face life. When she turned me down, I had a month of hell. I was a selfish bounder—a mean hound—I know it all. I've nothing to say, except that I did want you."

"You didn't," returned Chrissie calmly. "All you wanted was just to show Miss Carmichael that you didn't care. And—and—when you saw her and me

together, you knew you did care; *and you were ashamed of me.*"

"That's not true! It's not a bit true! But, for pity's sake, even if it were true, am I not being punished promptly? I have got to go back there, into the welter of it—the life I hate—and I don't suppose I shall ever see England, or—or you—again. Be a bit sorry for me, if you can."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked, after a pause.

"I want you, if you will, to come with me to the Metropole and help me to repack. My things are all over the place. Then we'll have a bit of dinner together; and then Blundell is coming to fetch me and see me off at Waterloo. . . . Please say you'll come. There's such a lot to say. The question of money—the signing of my will, and so on. I want to leave you somehow provided for . . . Oh Chrissie, let me do what I can!"

She gave a long, shuddering sigh. "I suppose we must go on—just until this evening," she faltered. "Yes. All right. I'll go. I'll do as you wish. Nothing seems to matter much, does it?"

IV

EVERYTHING was done. The kit had been somehow collected, bundled together and restrapped. A pile of soiled clothing lay upon the floor of the hotel bedroom, to be sent to the laundry and thence back to him in France.

The forced intimacy was like a horrible caricature of what might have been.

Chrissie, who had never in her life seen Captain Holderness without his coat on, now saw him partially strip and change. His underwear lay all about her—

mixed up with leather waistcoats, cardigans, big gloves, rough towels, tobacco tins, straps, flasks, gas-masks and the like.

It was by no means the first time that Chrissie had superintended the packing of a kit, and she was resourceful to a degree which surprised Rolf. She exclaimed in horror at the torn sleeping-bag and the damp, mud-encrusted blanket and rugs. Ringing the bell, she sent these things to be baked and scraped, while she unlocked her own trunk, found her work-box, and set herself down to repair the sleeping-bag.

Under her energetic supervision, the hotel "Boots" dried and then brushed, until things were as far shipshape as the lack of time allowed.

A curious way of spending the hours of one's wedding-day! But at least the call for action, the need of industry—the employment of heads and hands—saved one from madness. And now all was done. She looked at the clock.

"We must go and have dinner," said she, "or you will be faint with hunger by the time you reach Southampton."

"How should I have got on without you?" he said wonderingly. "You are a little trump, Chris."

"Oh, I am good enough at mending and packing. Dull women often are, I believe," she replied as she rose and tidied away the sewing apparatus she had been using. Then she went across to the washstand, pulled off her rings, and began to wash her hands. She had passed beyond the realms of coy embarrassment now. She could not even remember to think it odd that she and Rolf should be together in a bedroom, and that she should be washing her hands so composedly.

He exclaimed suddenly, "You've taken off your wedding-ring!"

She looked surprised. "Why not?"

"I thought"—with some confusion—"that girls never took off their wedding-ring."

"Oh?" Beyond the little interrogative sound she made no reply, but replaced upon her finger the plain gold and the big bunch of diamonds. "Come," said she, "we will go into the next room and ring for the soup."

He followed her to the adjoining room, wherein they could dine in private.

"Now, Chris," said he with determination, "there are things to be said before you and I part."

"Are there? No. I think we have said all we need," replied she in a lifeless way.

"Nothing of the kind. You accused me of pretty awful things, you know."

"And you admitted them, so why say any more? After all, I don't see that you have been much worse than I. I ought to have had more sense. I suppose I really knew all the time that you didn't care for me—that you never were thinking about me, when you stayed with us. I might have known, if I had had any sense at all, that men don't fall in love in absence with a girl they didn't concern themselves about when she was present. I took too much for granted. . . . There was perhaps some excuse for me while you were away. But the moment we met again, I ought to have known. You showed me so plainly that I was nothing to you."

"Oh, Chris, don't rub it in!"

"I don't want to. There's no need. And—and please don't be so upset. I really don't know that I mind much. I feel quite cool and steady inside; as if something had gone cold, right down in the heart of me. . . ."

"Anyhow, you're my wife, and you can't go back on that." He spoke with a kind of fierceness to cover

his remorse. Pulling a document from his pocket, he flung it on a side-table. "That's my will. Blitz can sign it, when he comes, and the waiter too; and I'll hand it over to Blitz to give to my lawyer. So if anything goes wrong with me, there's money to come to you, little woman—enough to make you independent of your own people. Oh, yes,"—as she made some movement of repudiation—"I know you would rather not have it, but you must at least let me do what I can. You don't want to humiliate me and yourself before everybody, do you? Do you, Chris? Do you want to tell your people how I've behaved?"

She stood gravely turning things over in her mind, and was aware that she did not. "Do you mean," she began hesitatingly, "that I have enough money to live upon, without applying to them?"

"You have—at least, I think so," he replied eagerly. "Not enough to run a house and servants, but quite enough to be comfortable in rooms or a hotel." He came over to her and gave her some memoranda, explaining exactly what her resources would be. A few hundreds a year, but it seemed wealth to Chrissie, whose own father allowed her but ten pounds per quarter, as in her maiden days. "I don't know how far I can expect you to regard my wishes," he told her meekly; "but after all, we are married, and I think I have a right to ask that you should for the present accept that position—that you should not make public our—our——"

"Mistake"—

"—No, I won't call it that. Our disagreement, if you like—at least until we have had time to think it out—say until I get leave again. If I don't stop a bullet during this push, I shall be senior for next leave, they always arrange that when a chap gets his leave cancelled."

The girl stood, twisting her hands together, her little teeth holding her under-lip, her eyes gazing out into the vacant future.

"I don't feel as if I know—as if I ought to promise *anything*. I simply feel as if I had been stunned. When I come to life again, how do I know what I am likely to feel? . . . . But oh, why don't they bring your dinner? You'll have to go before——"

As she spoke, the waiter threw open the door and rushed in with the first course.

Before the sweet had appeared, in walked Blitz, and with him he brought Miss Lockett.

"Forgive me, Rolf, if I'm unwelcome," said she, "but I felt this poor little lady ought not to be left alone, so I told her people I would look after her, and I want to coax her to come home with me——"

"Jolly good of you, Jane, old sport," said the bridegroom wearily. "You can make yourself useful in another direction too. I am about to sign my will, and you two can witness it. Then shove it in your pocket, Blitz, old man, and take it down to Lincoln's Inn to-morrow for them to put in the safe."

When this was done, the two men disappeared into the bedroom to see that all was clear and the luggage gone. Miss Lockett turned to the bride and put her strong arm about the shrinking shoulders.

"Look here, Babs," said she, "I was always fond of children. Wouldn't you rather not go back home? For myself, I can imagine nothing more ghastly than to lie awake in your little bed the whole night previous to your wedding—and to find yourself back in precisely the same spot next night!—If you happen to feel like that, why not come home with me? I've plenty of room, and I am a very old friend of that odd young husband of yours."

Something in the masculine voice and honest eyes of

the lady, mingling oddly with her green and yellow beads and hair dragged down into her shrew crow's-footed eyes, made instant appeal, as it had done in the church that morning, to the forlorn bride.

"Oh . . . would you?" she gasped, in precisely the note of unexpected reprieve which Jane had hoped for.

The two men returned, and Miss Lockett explained. Blitz undertook to send word of the arrangement to Cadogan Cresent.

"I expect they'll think I'm mad," said Chrissie feebly.

"They'll say so, but they won't really think so. They'll be very relieved in their hearts," replied Jane. "All right, then. As soon as you two are off, I'll call a taxi and carry off this chick and her boxes too."

"Talking of boxes," said Rolf vaguely, feeling in his pocket, "here's the box I bought for the play to-night. Why don't you two go? Better than sitting and looking at each other."

Chrissie said nothing. Life had swung her too far this day for her to be capable of independent action.

"You two had better say 'Good-bye' here," said Blundell, in tones carefully heartless and matter-of-fact. He drew Jane with him from the room, remarking to her, as they reached the corridor, "If he has an ounce of fine feeling or compassion in him, now is his time."

Chris and her husband stood looking at one another at last, with nothing between them but the naked fact of parting.

The thought of Eleanor Carmichael had faded back right out of sight in Rolf's mind. He saw only the child's face, wax-white, confronting him in such illimitable woe. It broke him down.

"Oh, Chris! *Chris!*" he muttered, holding out his arms, "for pity's sake try to forgive me! Try to help me! I'm not worth it!—I'm a scoundrel who ought to

be kicked, but if anybody could make anything of me, it's you! Say you'll try! Say you'll try!"

She made a little inarticulate sound, so moving that he lost himself in a whirlwind of pity. For the first time he snatched her to his heart, and held her as if by strong constraint he could force his love and hers together. And, with the feel of her pliant young body, the damask of her cheek which no lips but his own had ever pressed, there came to him a sudden outpouring of tenderness, as though some spring in his being had been tapped, whose existence he had never hitherto suspected.

"Chris! Chris!" he sobbed, as his mouth found hers at last; and with that the cold despair melted about her frost-bound heart, and suddenly she was yielding to him, weeping in his arms, realising that this, the first time, was also in all likelihood the last.

Rolf sank down in a chair with her upon his knees, rocking her, imploring pardon, telling her that she was his one chance of salvation, his star of hope.

She clung to him, reckless of all but the sudden wild ecstasy of the moment; listening to his voice, broken to a tone she had never heard from him before, saying, almost whispering, such things as she had never dreamed of, but breaking off drearily in a moment of recollection——

—"And now we must part—now—when we have only met this moment!"

Blundell knocked at the door. "I'm afraid you ought to be getting along, old man."

He was really touched by the white agony of the face which emerged from that door. Rolf wrung Jane's hand without speech, merely making a motion over his shoulder that she should go to his wife. Then he crashed downstairs as though pursued by furies, leaped into the waiting taxi, never looked up to the window

where Chris and Jane stood gazing forth, but dropped his head in his hands without shame as they started away among the traffic; nor did he lift it again until they were crossing Westminster Bridge.

V

ELEANOR CARMICHAEL stood in Room II at Burlington House, gazing upon Blundell's portrait of Christian Holderness.

It was entitled in the catalogue

"A soldier's wife: portrait of Mrs. Rolf Holderness."
Rupert Blundell, A.R.A.

It represented a glimpse of an office interior. The girl whose lifesize presentment it was sat at a typewriter, which stood upon a roll-top desk stacked with papers. She had turned from her work to read a letter. The letter, written in pencil, was open in her hand, and upon her knee lay its stampless envelope with the square pink mark of the Field post-office.

She wore a simple office frock, and one would have said there was nothing particularly arresting, either in the composition or colouring. Yet it was the picture of the year. All day crowds stood before it, and turned away in an odd silence. One felt the strain of the war, somehow—the business absorption of the lonely girl with her heart always the sport of destiny—at the mercy of the gun-fire of hostile millions.

Eleanor had, of course, come prepared to sneer. That Blitz—Blitz of all men—should descend to the painting of a popular picture—a picture before which Academy crowds would halt! For the matter of that—that Blitz should submit tamely to the A.R.A. now

tacked on to his brigand name!—He, the outlaw, who had defied the beaten track for so long—that he should yield at last! So Eleanor whispered to herself as she tried her hardest not to admire the sincerity, the breadth, the feeling in the canvas before her.

"She's not like that. He's painted it all into her face. It isn't really there. The long and short of it is that old Blitz is in love with the little grass widow. Just the sort of dolly that a really clever man takes up with. Finds her restful, I suppose."

She turned from her reverie to see Blundell himself standing at a little distance, his eyes upon her in considerable amusement.

Smiling radiantly, she pushed her way out of the crowd, joined him; and when they had greeted, they found places on the centre divan.

"Well," said Blitz at once, "and how do you like it?"

It was so unlike him to ask for an opinion on his work that she opened wide eyes of wonder. Then she determined to let him have it. If all the world praised him, he should yet have truth from her! She smiled lazily. "Too perfectly sweet!" said she.

Blitz's face lit up with humour. "Bravo!" he replied. "I thought as much! I'm glad on the whole to find you just as bad a critic as I expected!"

She sat up, puzzled, eyeing him. "Critic! That was not criticism! Are you asking me to *criticise* that picture?"

"I wanted to find out what you really thought of it; and you have given me your opinion in a phrase. You think that portrait belongs to the 'too-perfectly-sweet' order of art—deny it if you can."

"Well, Blitz, isn't it perilously near it?"

"Why, my good girl, that picture's great. It's going to live," said the artist calmly. "Do you suppose I

don't know, just because I happen to be the man who painted it? The real stuff is in it. It's fit to hang on the same wall with a Velasquez. In fact, it's so good that I have forced the old Johnnies to admit it. They have made me, the outlaw, an A.R.A. on the strength of it! In other words, the revolution is inaugurated. I must write and tell Holderness all about it."

"Have you good news of Rolf?" asked Eleanor, gazing idly round.

"Not so recent as you have, I presume?"—

"Oh!" with an embarrassed laugh, "I don't hear very regularly."

"Indeed! I think Mrs. Holderness hears every second day."

There was a short pause. Then Eleanor asked evenly:

"How does she like this office work? Is it for the War Office?"

"She's doing some very fine work now, I understand. Not the work she is there represented as doing. She began like that, but her merit was outstanding, and they soon transferred her to something more important——"

"Ah! Then it's true, what we heard——"

"What who heard?"

"Max Ritter, to be exact. He was told that she is shut up in some secret place, doing specification drawings of the last new submarine-destroying dodge."

Blitz gave much the same scornful amusement which he had bestowed upon her art criticism. "That's a good story," said he. "Ritter must have evolved it out of his own colossal brain. But since there has been a new infallible specific at least every six months since the beggars started, I wonder that he should still be nibbling."

"I don't quite know what you mean, but I'm afraid

so far we are not destroying them half as fast as good patriots could wish," observed Miss Carmichael slowly. "Max doesn't think so. He is very uneasy. You know, he himself had a splendid idea, only the War Office, or the Admiralty, or whoever it is——"

"The Food Control, perhaps?"—

—"Don't be ridiculous!—turned him down!"

"They probably thought the remedy emanated from a tainted source."

"How hidebound you are, Blitz! You don't know how poor Max has felt it—the way his old friends have cut him! Surely you're not so ungenerous as to pretend you think him a traitor?"

"No pretence about it. I'm sure he's *not* a traitor—to his own country."

"Which is England."

"Is it?"

"Blitz, you are odious."

"Eleanor, you and I were once pals. Take a word from Daddy Blitz. Drop Ritter." Blundell's voice was suddenly as soft as he alone knew how to make it. Eleanor did not at once reply; and glancing at her, he was just in time to intercept a look in those misty blue eyes which might have been termed beseeching. She made a movement of her body, slipping along the seat so as to come nearer to him, and she began:

"Ah, you don't know!" . . . Here intervened a distinct pause: but, instead of the words he looked for, what she next said was—"what a good fellow he is."

"He's a German, a regular out-and-out German. No shame to him. If I were an Englishman in Berlin, should I lose my sympathy with my own country? I say nothing against Ritter when I say I know him to be a public danger."

"You *know?* Oh, Blitz, then why don't you act?"

The words actually leapt from her lips, and Blitz cursed himself for an incautious fool.

"I was speaking of moral certainty," said he hastily. "One can't act on that, unfortunately."

"Can't you? At least, if you think as you say you do, you ought to give the Government a warning, ought you not?"

"They had the beast in their hands and they let him go. What's the use of my talking?"

"Well," remarked Eleanor after a longish pause, "he has been at large for a couple of years now, and no harm has come of it."

"True; which may show that our secret police is not quite so inefficient as we sometimes fancy."

"Do you think"—very swiftly—"that the secret police are on Max's track?"

"My dear Eleanor, what have I to do with the secret police?"

She laughed slily. "If you *had* anything to do with them, you wouldn't be likely to own it, would you?"

"Are you endeavouring to pump me, young woman?"

"A dry enough pump! And the oil I could offer won't grease it—eh, Blitz?"

"Afraid not. At least it would be dishonest of me to let you waste time and skill—such skill!—upon a dry well. Nothing in it!"

"Except, perhaps, Truth—at the bottom?"

"I handed her out to you at the beginning of this interview. I told you to drop Max." He rose as he spoke. "I might repeat the caution with my leave-taking. Are you by any chance thinking of marrying him?"

The toss of her head was like that of a proud young horse maddened by a bearing-rein. "I haven't made up my mind," said she slowly.

VI

BLUNDELL walked back meditatively to Memling House, the charming little old place which he had bought in Studio Lane, an almost unknown backwater of Kensington, and to which he had added a large studio.

To the vestibule of this annexe he let himself in with a latch-key and walked through the large, light, quiet place, where were to be found none of the modern, expensive trappings of a show studio.

Reaching the further end, where the new building joined the little old house beyond, he unlocked the door and passed through into a narrow dark passage; found the stairs and ascended to the first floor, where he knocked upon a door.

"Who is it?" was demanded from within. He replied, giving a word which was apparently a passport, for a key was heard to turn and he entered a small, well-lit room, provided with large, desk-topped tables, upon which were pinned out sheets of cartridge paper upon which diagrams were traced with exquisite precision.

At the centre table Christian Holderness was seated, compasses in hand, bending over her work. She wore a rose-coloured overall of spotless neatness. On either side of her, two other ladies were busy upon work of the same character.

"Could you give me a few minutes' conversation, Mrs. Holderness?" asked Blundell gravely.

He saw Chris's eyes flash from one to the other of her two subordinates. She then replied:

"I am afraid I must ask you to wait for the lunch break, Mr. Blundell. Where shall I find you then? In the studio?"

"If you please," he replied ceremoniously; and, turning, went out again, hearing the key turn in the lock behind him as he went downstairs. Regaining the door communicating with his studio, he opened it, and examined with care the bolts and lock. Then he reached up to the lintel, touched a spring, and watched a second door, made of iron, slip out from the thickness of the wall. The fastenings of this also he examined with an electric light. Then he walked to the bend of the passage, where he should have been able to go through into the dwelling-rooms of the house. This outlet had been lately walled up. The plaster was not yet dry. He held up his light and searched carefully for cracks, or any kind of mark, but found none.

His brow was knit as he went back to the studio, walked its entire length, and round from it to the small garden at the rear of his premises, flanked by a blind wall which formed the back of a large riding-school and stables.

His eye travelled to the two windows of the first-floor room in which the drawing was going on. These had lately been protected by a set of iron bars. Entrance that way was impossible. The roof of the little house had no skylight; so that there was no way into this room but by the strongly protected stair from below, or the barred windows above.

Blundell went indoors again, reflective, and mooned about with his pipe for half an hour, burnishing a suit of old armour to pass the time until he heard voices on the stairs, and knew that Chris had let out the two lady clerks to go to lunch. They entered, dressed for the street, and made their exit together. There was a further sound of keys turning, and then Christian appeared.

The four months which had elapsed since her marriage had given her face all that he had put into the

picture. As she came towards him, still with her business gravity of expression, he thought her perfectly lovely.

"Come along in to lunch with me," he said; "you haven't lunched with me for weeks, and I have something of importance to discuss."

She smiled. "I often feel too tired to talk when I come from work," she said apologetically. "But I'll make an exception to-day, and I am very hungry, so lead on!"

They went together out of the studio door; and as it was raining a little, she made allusion to Blitz's patriotism in blocking himself out of his own house in order to secure the safety of the important drawings.

He did not reply until they were in his comfortable bachelor dining-room, upon the table of which was spread a cold meal—salad, fish rissoles, fruit and so on. When she was seated, he drew a heavy portière across the door, sat down near her, poured Chianti into her glass and began——

"As you know, I never thought it a sensible plan of Dunmow's to have the things done here. It saved a lot of money and fuss, no doubt, but——"

"But?"

"If it hadn't ensured my seeing you most days, I think I should have advised against it."

Her eyes were anxious. "You speak as if you thought—as if you feared——"

He rested his folded arms upon the table and fixed his eyes upon her. "How could Max Ritter possibly have come to know that you were occupied in this work?"

"*Max Ritter!* Impossible!"

"I met Miss Carmichael at the R.A. this morning, and she told me she had heard it from him."

Chris sat staring. Some secret thought turned her

scarlet. "Oh, Mr. Blundell," she said at last, under her breath, "it couldn't be. It must be a chance shot."

He kept his gaze on the table-cloth, and in spite of his pity for her he had to go on.

"But your husband knows?"

"He knows I am doing important Government work, and that I am doing it here——"

"And he is in communication with Eleanor——"

She looked up, carefully unconcerned but with tightened lips. "Of course . . . . he would be——"

"At least she says so."

"But you know better than to think—Ah, Blitz, you know he would not tell her *that*—is it likely he would tell her anything she could hand on? . . . . Why, you know it was about Max they quarrelled——"

He made no reply, and she pursued, feverishly:

"Are all the censorship people to be trusted, do you think?"

"Your letters to the Front are not censored."

There was a silence. At last:

"Both those clerks you have are to be trusted, I suppose?" he asked.

"That brings me to what I was wishing to speak to you about. These ladies were not my own choice. The Department handed them out to me, so I am not responsible for them. I believe them to be trustworthy, I have never noticed the least thing to the contrary, except——"

"Except?"

"It hardly seems worth mentioning, but as Lord Dunmow directed me to notice everything they said or did, of course I do. Last week, I found a pocket-handkerchief belonging to Miss Hunter lying on the window-sill. It was all crunched up, just as it had been in her pocket, not spread out as if she had meant it to be a signal; and she said she had shaken crumbs from

it upon the window-sill for the birds, and forgotten it. She was apologetic, but not too much so. She did not seem confused. I reminded her that it was forbidden to open the windows at the bottom. But since then I have never left either of them in the room for a moment without me."

"H'mph!" said Blundell reflectively. "That may or may not mean anything. But I had better get Miss Hunter's address and record from the Office. She is not likely to be acquainted with Ritter himself, but one of his lot has quite likely got hold of her, and made love and pretended to arrange a code of signals. I don't quite see where a man could stand, so as to detect a handkerchief on that window-sill; but you never know."

"Please find out all you can," she urged, "so as to exonerate Rolf completely. Ah, you don't think it of him, do you?"

"I hardly know. He's no fool. But I am pretty sure that Ritter is going to risk his very neck to lay his hands on these drawings"—he broke off a moment, then added with a deep seriousness—"Mrs. Holderness, I will take you into full confidence. *We hope to catch him red-handed.*"

She gave a frightened gasp.

"He's too powerfully backed for us to down him with anything short of that. He has some hold over this chap in Parliament—just as he has established a hold over poor Eleanor——"

—"A hold over her?"—

"Yes. I have no doubt at all that he has lent her money, and can put the screw on. She isn't the kind of woman who takes to spying for the sheer love of the thing, is she?"

"I—I hardly know. I have only seen her once or twice——"

"Well, I knew her, before that devil got his claws into her."

Chris heaved a long sigh—compounded partly of horror, partly of surprise that she, who had lived so long in the "take-it-all-for-granted" atmosphere of Cadogan Crescent, should be passing through times like these. Her mind was working away at its problem.

"I never said a word to Rolf about your having invented this wonderful thing," she began; but Blitz cut in quickly—

"Oh, when you say invented—I'm not a practical engineer. I only had the notion, I had to get men with tools to work it out——"

"Well, isn't that inventing? I say, nobody knows about it."

He smiled across the table at her. "Yourself, madam. I don't count Dunmow and the Admiralty lot."

"Well, then, why should Ritter suspect your house?"

"Because he has found out that you are on this work. If he knows that, of course he knows where you go every day. Nothing easier. The point is—how did he know it? I can't but suspect that it was through Eleanor, *via* Rolf, little as Rolf himself may suspect it."

She shook her head in obstinate unbelief. "Is there anything I could do?" she asked.

"Keep an eye on Miss Hunter, and never let your keys out of your own keeping for a moment. I think you are safe enough, going and coming. What Ritter wants are the plans, and they are of no use to him until they are quite finished—I have a scheme in my head—an idea—if it can be worked out. Would you help——"

"You know I would. So would Jane."

"Jane was always a sport. You and she still get on together?"

"Excellently. Her flat really was too big for her in war-time, and it is just what I wanted. I am making

my rooms quite habitable with her help—though I have to wrestle hard with my inherited instincts!" she laughed quite gaily.

"At least," thought Blundell, gazing earnestly at her, "she is not breaking her heart for him." He sat pondering for some moments and then inquired suddenly—

"Would Jane forgive it, do you think, if I let her in for a share of the conspiracy?"

Chris looked quite eager. "I think she would thank you on her bended knees! She is seething with what you might call potential patriotism! The thought of being of some real use——"

Blundell made no reply. She could see that he was weighing something deeply in his mind. It was a part of her virtue that she knew when to be silent. She sat now perfectly still, with a hundred questions on the tip of her tongue.

At last he pushed back his chair and looked at her. "I might work it another way," he said, "but it seems to me that the risk would be too great. There is information which I must convey to Ritter through Eleanor. If I give it her by word of mouth, he wouldn't believe it. He will think it almost certain that I am purposely giving false information. I think we must let it seem to come through Rolf."

"Oh!" cried Chris, springing up, her face aflame—"if you could do it any other way——"

"For the first time since I have known you, Mrs. Rolf, you are protesting before you know the facts. Listen. I mean to go and have tea with Eleanor. I own that I have not been for some time; as you know, her old set have practically dropped her since she took up Ritter. But our chance meeting at Burlington House will suggest a reason for my little attempt to renew old friendship. I shall have with me a pocket-book, which will contain a letter from me to Rolf,

written, stamped and ready to be posted. I shall accidentally leave this pocket-book and its contents behind me in the hall, and shall not call for it until the following morning. In that interval we can be absolutely certain that the letter will be steamed open and read."

"And shall you know whether it has been tampered with?" asked Chris breathlessly.

"We have plenty of experts who will," he replied smiling. "But I am practically sure it will be done, because Ritter can't afford to miss a single chance; and I don't think either of them would give me credit for doing such a thing on purpose."

"You must be very careful to make what you say in the letter sound unintentional."

"Rather!"

"And you won't ever really post the letter, will you?"

"Oh, no, it will be just a decoy. For your satisfaction, little lady, I will just say that, if Rolf is the man I take him for, he writes very little to Miss Carmichael. In fact I shouldn't be surprised to know that he has never sent her a line since he went back."

He saw a look of pleasure spread slowly over the tense little face. What he said comforted her, for she had come to rely upon him. He had to choke back most of what he would have liked to say, for he knew that even a few unguarded words from him would destroy that child-like trust and spoil their friendship.

"You'll understand, Mrs. Rolf, that you say no syllable of any of this to a soul, until I give you leave? Particularly must you not mention it to our Jane, even though I may be letting her in for something a bit disagreeable. The fewer the people in the know, the simpler for us all. Have I your promise, little lady?"

She laid her hand in his, and her eyes met his with

such ardent loyalty and blind faith that he had to fight down his craving to snatch her to his heart.

"Blitz, I promise," she answered simply. It was seldom that she used his pet-name; and the fact that she had done so was a drop of cool water in the desert of his craving soul.

VII

THE succeeding week went by slowly. It may have been simply the knowledge that Blundell seriously believed the secrecy of his plans to be in danger; but it seemed to Christian that even the walls had eyes.

The work was nearing completion, and as the time arrived the strain grew greater. The notion that Ritter was holding his hand only until all was done before making a supreme attempt to possess himself of these treasures was nerve-wearing to a degree which Chris had not foreseen.

She more than once was fairly certain of being followed. Not on her way to work, for her enemies had ascertained long ago where she went; but after business hours—on one occasion when she was actually on her way to interview Lord Dunmow.

She did as instructed by Blundell as to her course in such a contingency—hailed a taxi, directed him to a large West End draper's shop, alighted, entered at the main entrance, left at another, in a different street, called another taxi and drove off in a different direction.

She was certain that Miss Hunter manœuvred to be left alone in the work-room; and the strain of keeping her clerk always under her eye grew exhausting. She had not much fear that the secrets of the plans themselves could be conveyed by this girl, since she was ignorant and rather stupid, though exquisitely clean and correct in her work. It would be only by means of

tracing that she could carry away data, and on one occasion, Chris was almost sure that she was doing this; after which, her own attention to Miss Hunter's work was unrelenting. As to the most vital sections of the drawings, the Head of the Work-room kept these in her own capable hands, and did not bring them out until her assistants were gone.

She had no more private talk with Blundell, and did not even know whether he had carried out his scheme with regard to the letter and his visit to Eleanor; but one day she reached home, very tired, to find that Jane had a visitor, none other than Miss Carmichael herself.

It had been a most exhausting day, for the drawings were all but finished. In fact next day would see the last of them. She had that evening most gladly said good-bye to the two clerks, and seen them off the premises, not to return. The work had been hard, even without counting the nerve strain. She felt that she needed a rest, and was wondering whether a few days' leave would be granted her.

The situation was complicated by the fact that Rolf expected to be given leave very shortly. She could not be out of the way when he returned, though her mind winced away from the thought of what could possibly happen. She did not make the mistake of laying too much stress upon their parting. His own sense of his bad behaviour—his remorse and compunction—had been quite enough to melt his heart for those last moments. His letters since had been full of contrition and in them she discerned an honest effort to make the best of things and to take an interest in his wife. But she could feel that it *was* an effort; and every now and then she believed that she got an inkling of what it was costing him.

The one compensation she found in the strenuous

nature of her work was that it kept her from thought. She had her mind so much upon the stretch all day, and came home at night so weary, that she had not time to dwell upon her wrecked life.

Insistent fears were, however, knocking at the door as the date of the probable leave drew near. They were colouring her mood as she made her way back to the flat in Carisbrook Mansions which she shared with Jane —who, though possessed of comfortable means, was only too glad, in war-time, to find so congenial a companion to share her expenses. It was odd that Chris should prove so sympathetic to both these chosen friends of Rolf, to whom he had feared to introduce her!

It was a gay evening, at the beginning of May; and Jane, to whom rations were quite a side-issue, so long as she could buy tulips and irises for her vases, had made her room—half-parlour, half-studio—gay with rainbow blossoms. As Chris pushed open the door, it seemed a bower of gladness in a dreary world.

By the open window sat Jane, in what she called a tea-gown, but her friends described as a dressing-gown, of mustard-coloured wool-backed satin, the surface considerably impaired by wear; her scraggy neck was loaded with purple and coral-coloured beads, to suit the tulips and irises.

Beside her, someone was drinking tea—someone tall and graceful, who rose to her feet as Chris entered, holding out her hand with a pleading smile.

"How delightful to see you, dear Mrs. Holderness," said Miss Carmichael. "Mr. Blundell was calling upon me a few days back, and he told me our dear Jane here would be glad to see me. I said I thought I was in disgrace, but he laughed at the idea, so I ventured; and she has been so kind. Will you be kind too?"

"Why not?" said Chris composedly, as she sat down and pulled off her gloves. "I am glad to see any of

Jane's friends, of course. Tea please, old thing, I am parched with thirst."

"Ah, you work so hard," said Eleanor in her thrilling voice, which Chris always seemed to hear as it were through Rolf's ears. "Is Mr. Blundell a hard task-master?"

Chris looked up from her tea-cup in surprise. "Mr. Blundell? I am working for the Government."

"Yes, but under Mr. Blundell"——

Chris laughed a little. "Mr. Blundell isn't *in* the Government," she said scornfully. "Who has been telling you that fairy-tale?"

"Why, Blitz told me himself."

Chris seemed highly amused. "Well, if so, either you misunderstood him, Miss Carmichael, or else—pardon the vulgarity—he must have been pulling your leg."

Eleanor grew quite pink. Jane was laughing too. "What put that into your head?" said she. "Oh, of course, I know! It is because Chris sat to him for her portrait, and used to go every day to the studio for sittings. Quite enough to start a story like that!"

Jane was as honest as the day, and as she spoke Chris was inly breathing thanks to Blitz for having made her swear to keep everything from the dear lady, whose complete unconsciousness was worth much at this moment. How nearly Eleanor's probe had gone home! That lie about Blundell having been her informant was well told indeed!

"My sittings are all over, some time ago now," said she kindly, as one instructing the ignorant. Then she switched off the talk to the pictures of the year, and extracted an opinion of the great Blundell masterpiece so much more favourable than that given by the lady to the master himself, as to be a keen joy to Chris, who

wondered what critic of renown Eleanor had since encountered, to change her views so markedly.

Somehow the talk drifted to air raids. Eleanor guided it, but very cleverly. Nobody who was not aware of her drift could say she dragged it in. Thence she slipped on, smoothly and most naturally, to the submarine menace. That week the sinkings had been serious, and Jane joined her vehemently in deploring them.

"If the Government could hit upon some way to rid us of that pest, they would indeed earn all our votes!" cried the visitor fervently. "Did you know there is a rumour flying about that such a thing has been at last discovered?"

"Is there? What kind of thing?" cried Chris. "Do tell us about it."

"Oh come, Mrs. Holderness! You know far more of the matter than I do! Is not the whole thing Mr. Blundell's own invention?"

Chris pursed up her mouth with a naughty look, "Mr. Blundell's invention seems to have been in excellent working order, when he tried it on you the other day, Miss Carmichael," said she mischievously. "What had you done to provoke him to such a revenge? What else did he tell you?"

Eleanor lost her temper. "It was not from Mr. Blundell that I heard of his wonderful idea. Everyone is talking of it," she snapped.

"Jane—ask him to supper, and extort a full account from him," said Chris eagerly. "How dare he keep such a thing from his nearest and dearest?"

"Well," said Jane in simple surprise, "frankly, Miss Carmichael, I don't believe it. If Blitz had invented anything at all, he'd be as proud as a peacock, and the first thing he would do would be to come bragging to me——"

—"Or to Mrs. Holderness"—venomously from Eleanor.

"Yes, or to me! I'm his friend, too, through Rolf! I should be told, I am sure of it! I can't believe there can be anything in it."

"I wish there were, with all my soul!" cried Jane. "I'd leave every penny of my fortune to Blitz if he had invented anything to stop these devils in their work."

Eleanor sat quite still for a minute or two, considering. This was a surprise to her. Jane was a person whose every thought showed like a pebble in clear water. She was utterly incapable of such a bluff as this. She could not know. Then Chris Holderness had worked for Blitz all this time without telling her a word? . . . . Had it not been for a certain document in her pocket, she would have concluded that Ritter was on a totally wrong scent. Knowing this not to be so, there was but the one alternative. *The thing must be of deadly importance.*

She talked a little more, all she said slipping helpless oft the cool armour of Chris's composure. When she left them, and was seated in a taxi on her way home, she drew from her pocket a copied extract from a letter and read it over carefully.

"As it is your wife who will take the risk, I am bound, in my own view, to inform you what the risk will be. It will last but a few hours, and I think it will amount to very little. So far as I can tell, we are not suspected, nor is anybody watching us. However, in a case of this kind, as you will judge from the information in my last, we are taking no risks. To make assurance doubly sure, I am not sending the most vital diagrams direct to Whitehall. They will very unostentatiously leave the place you know of by hand, and be deposited for the night in old Jane's flat, whence the authorities them-

selves are to collect them next morning, in any fashion which seems to them safest.

"It may look to you like exaggerated precaution; but remember what hangs upon it; and if you ask why I should expose your wife to danger by placing the plans under the same roof with her, my reply is that a flat occupied by two maiden ladies, without even a maid sleeping in the house, is the last place in which one would search for Government secrets. Their very helplessness is their security. . . ."

"With this in my pocket," reflected Miss Carmichael, smiling, "it was to say the least of it odd that the chit of a girl should suppose that she could bluff me. . . . Jane knows nothing, evidently. . . . Yes. It is by far the best and simplest plan. Memling House may be guarded,—it probably is; and even if it were not, it is always risky to knock down and kill a man in a London street. Besides . . . don't want Blitz killed. . . . Now whereabouts, in that flat, would the chit of a girl deposit valuables? If it were left to her, she would lock them up in a trunk under her bed and sleep with the key under her pillow. But she has Blitz at the back of her—Blitz, who painted her—with all these Government secrets in her eyes and all these unsuitable responsibilities weighing down her ridiculous little shoulders! He will advise hiding them among all that mess in the corner of Jane's studio, or in one of those ottoman things with which the place is strewn. A few minutes' systematic search would find them, and without disturbing the ladies. . . . Yes! Our plan is to allow them to go on supposing that nobody is on the watch! Let them carry their precious plans unmolested into the flat, and trust Max and his men to do the rest. . . . Ah, what a nation of fools we are! . . . Sunk in our sense of security still, after all these years of

blundering war and successful treachery! Old Blitz hugging himself with the belief that nobody suspects the use to which his studio as been put—that nobody is on the watch, either for him or his inventions! . . . To realise how gullible my country is—how completely a prey to the intellect of Germany—is almost to make me feel that I could be content to become a German's wife. Oh, how I hate stupidity!"

At the last word, her brow contracted and she heaved a sigh which was alost a groan; for Chris Holderness at least had not been stupid. The little insipid girl, as she termed her, who had stolen the man whom Eleanor still loved, had fenced marvellously that afternoon. "If only," thought Eleanor, "that little girl were backed up by one or two accomplices with brains, she might be positively dangerous. What made Rolf think her stupid, I wonder? Men never can discriminate. If a girl is simple-minded and half-educated and undeveloped they call her stupid. 'A dear little soul,' he told me, 'but an utter muff—with the art instincts of a provincial postmistress'—Master Rolf, you made a bad mistake somewhere! I wonder what she will do with you when she gets you back?"

VIII

AFTER the finding and reading of the letter in Blundell's pocket, Ritter had at first been of opinion that his easiest course was to capture the man himself, with the plans upon him, on his way from Memling House to Jane's flat.

Up to the very last moment he had not decided against this plan, and had helpers posted in one or two hiding-places along the little bent alley, which led nowhere.

Something, which might or might not have been chance, decided him against this course.

It was about seven o'clock on a cold gusty evening, spitting frozen rain. It was still fully daylight, when there came into sight round the bend of Studio Lane a couple of sturdy working-men with their tools on their backs, apparently going home. They had hardly made their appearance when the door of the big studio at Memling House opened and out came Blundell and Mrs. Holderness, the former carrying an attaché case which was large and seemed heavy; the latter a long roll of paper or parchment, apparently too large to be packed inside it.

They stepped into the road a few paces ahead of the two workmen, who were going the same way; and at the moment there came into view at the other end of the road, first a nondescript individual, apparently in a hurry, and next a large, heavy policeman, who advanced like the nondescript as it were to meet the workmen and the artists.

This amounted to a congestion of traffic hitherto without parallel in the history of Studio Lane. . [.] . Was it coincidence? Anyway, it forced Max's hand. In full sight of three witnesses, his own man was powerless, even if reinforced. He could not even follow, until the policeman was out of sight.

This solid representative of law and order was in no hurry. He walked along calmly unobservant until he reached Memling House, where he came to a standstill, close to where Ritter himself was lurking; and seemed to be absorbed in the contemplation of Blundell's front door. After some long moments, he strolled on again; but just as it seemed likely that he would turn the corner, and Ritter was preparing to spring out, he seemed to take an interest in the movements of the nondescript, and stood in full view to watch him out

of sight at the end of the lane opposite that at which Blundell and Chris had disappeared. Then he paced back again, right past the house; and hung about in all for quite five minutes, at the end of which time, the quarry was out of reach and could not be traced.

It was a matter of much difficulty to find a taxi and proceed as fast as possible to a small shop facing the main entrance of Carisbrook Mansions. The man who had been left on duty at this point reported that he had seen no gentleman enter in the company of a young lady, nor one who carried an attaché case, nor any long roll of paper. Various people had come in and gone out. In fact, so many that he got a bit muddled. A gentleman home on leave, with a huge kit-bag and so on, had driven up in a taxi. He could not say which flat he had gone into. Five young ladies had gone in, seven elderly, and three quite old. Four maidservants had gone to the post and back. Three tradesmen had left goods. Five gentlemen had also entered, of whom three had not again emerged. More closely questioned, he could only say that "they looked like residents." The gentleman on leave was an Anzac—he was sure of that.

Ritter began to suppose himself bested after all. In his mind had floated from the first the notion that the pocket-book might have been baited and left as a trap for Eleanor. The mere fact of her known friendship with himself must make even so casual a man as Blundell suspicious. If his fears were true, then the plans were safe by now—carried off to some destination which he had no means of tracing.

He was half inclined to abandon the idea of breaking into the flat that night, when one of his subordinates came up and told him that the man on duty, further pressed, had confessed to having "passed a remark or two" with one of the maids who came out to post a

letter. The questioner gathered that he had turned his back for a minute or two in order to stroll to the pillar-box with her, since she had told him she had something queer to tell him of the goings-on in the flats, and he had hoped to glean information. The girl was clearly making a fool of him, since she had no information to give, beyond some nonsense about a chimney on fire—and it was quite possible that, during his momentary inattention, Mr. Blundell and Mrs. Holderness might have slipped in.

Ritter was hardly inclined to give the inhabitants of Carisbrook Mansions credit for such subtlety. However, it was easy enough to ascertain whether Mrs. Holderness were in her flat or not. A messenger was dispatched to the nearest public telephone, to ring her up and ask, on behalf of John Smith and Co., whether she had ordered a dozen of whisky.

This man brought back the news that Mrs. Holderness had been called to the telephone and had denied the order with some asperity.

Now, if Mrs. Holderness and Blundell had got in, and if they had for this purpose arranged that their maid should act as a decoy and distract the attention of the man on duty—then there was no doubt of their being more on the alert than Ritter had foreseen. In that case, the passers-by in Studio Lane were not coincidence. The plans for which Potsdam would give so much were actually in the flat, and unless he got them that night he would never get them; for to clash with the Government emissaries who might come next morning to fetch them was the last thing he desired.

His deliberations, it should be stated, took place in the small waiting-room, on the first floor, of a dentist opposite, who let his room after business hours to the *soidisant* emissary of an American firm whose commercial travellers came to him there to present reports,

during the short period which must elapse before his London business was on so secure a footing as to possess premises of its own.

As he sat in the window of this coign of vantage, brooding, cogitating, his eyes, fixed absently upon the front door of the Mansions, saw something of interest. It was not yet by any means dark, and Blundell was distinctly visible as he came out and stood in the entrance. He carried no attaché case, nor package of any kind. Neither did he seem in any haste, or at all suspicious that his movements might be of interest to anyone. He pulled out his case of cigarettes, selected one, found a match, lit it, and then sauntered deliberately down the street; pausing when he reached a tube station, to buy an evening paper, which he opened, and was reading as he passed out of sight.

Ritter bit his lip.

All turned now upon the ability of his brain to defeat that of his adversary. Was Blundell clever, or was he merely lucky? The carrying of the plans safely away from Memling House, the entering of Carisbrook Mansions unseen, the action of the maid with his spy, all might be just lucky coincidence. A man who is completely unsuspicious may sometimes march calmly through a place where a man who fears danger at every turn may court disaster.

If this was a trap—if Ritter walked into it—it was the end of all things for him. On the other hand, if the plans could not be got, he was registered a failure at headquarters.

. . . And to-night was his only remaining chance!

If he could but see into that flat, and ascertain what was going on! . . .

Just two women in a flat alone! . . .

It all sounded so easy. Was Blundell counting upon that? Or was he not?

Suddenly an idea darted into his mind. Seizing the telephone, he rang up Eleanor Carmichael.

"Are you there? Is it Miss Carmichael speaking?"

"Yes it is I. Is that you, Max?"

"Are you alone? Anybody else in the room?"

"Nobody."

"Well then, see here. Is there any excuse which would make it seem natural for you to go to Carisbrook Mansions this evening, after dinner?"

"Mercy, no! What could I go for? I never did such a thing in my life! They would smell a rat directly."

"Are you sure? Think! Isn't there something? . . . Ah yes, by Jove! A rumour from the Front! Couldn't you have heard something that would do it? Some rumour to the effect that Captain Holderness had been blown to bits by a shell?—You rush round there to know if it's true, because you loved him once, and you're half distracted——"

"You beast," said Eleanor quietly at her end of the wire.

"Quite so. But don't waste time. Try to grasp the idea. Could you carry it off?"

"Conceivably. But why do you want me to go there?"

"I want to know what they are doing, whether the two women are alone, whether they seem to have got the jumps at all, or whether they are just going on as usual. I confess that Blundell is worrying me a little. I want to know whether he is there, or expected. If you drop in about nine o'clock, say?"

"No, I'm hanged if I do!—Give that wretched little girl the shock of her life!"

"Give her the joy of her life. She'll think she's free to encourage old Blitz. It would be fine to watch 'em both take the news—if he's there——"

"If Blitz were there, he'd see through me."

"Stuff and nonsense! He'd take anything you handed out to him."

"If you really believe that, Max, you're not fit to run this show."

"That's a question that time must prove. Now remember, you have just got this news by post. Provide yourself with a page of a letter, scrawled on the thin paper they use in the trenches, with a bit of old pencil. Even if your visit does no other good, it will be an excellent thing, for it will take the Chris-girl's mind off her work and shatter her a bit. I've known quite a good conspirator break down before now, under the pressure of sudden bad news connected with her best boy. Any way, you do it, my girl. I wish it. Do you hear?"

There was a ring of command in the voice, like that in the tones of an animal trainer who will coax just so long as he believes the whip not to be necessary. It is due to Eleanor to state that she held out for a while, though she winced under the lash. Her ultimate surrender was nevertheless a foregone conclusion.

IX

In Jane's studio, the chill of that sleety, gusty night of an English spring was enlivened by the comforting warmth of a fire. Round it were seated five persons —Jane herself, strung up to a pitch of some excitement, Christian Holderness, Blundell, the Anzac who had that afternoon been seen to enter the Mansions, and one of those persons whom the watcher could only describe as "residents," though he did not happen to be a tenant in that particular block of flats.

The maid employed by the two ladies did not sleep in the flat. She came each morning in time to get

breakfast, and left, as a rule, after laying the evening meal. The remains of a picnic supper lay about in the studio on various tables and ottomans. Chris had just risen and was piling the dirty plates in order to carry them to the scullery, when a ring was heard at the door of the flat.

Silence fell for a moment—a breathless silence while they all looked at one another. It was the "resident" who spoke first, in a subdued voice.

"Have you any idea as to who that might be, Miss Lockett?"

Jane, inclined to be tremulous, was calmed by his serious air. "None at all, Mr. Mellor," said she.

"It is probably quite unimportant. Someone to collect a bill or the like. But on the supposition that it may be someone whom you cannot well avoid admitting, I will ask that you and Mrs. Holderness go into her sitting-room and make it look as if you were passing the evening there. We will switch all lights out here and remain quite silent. We will also lock ourselves in when you ladies leave the room, in case anybody might inadvertently open a door—I have known such things to happen. Let Mrs. Holderness answer the bell. Now, Miss Lockett, are you prepared to carry off the situation if necessary? Do you guarantee your nerve?"

Jane stood there, looking white. Quantities of words were on the tip of her garrulous tongue—foolish surmises as to who the visitor could be—but the look on the faces of the others steadied her down into silence.

"I will ask you to trust me," she said simply; and Blitz murmured softly, "Bravo, old sport."

Chris, with lightning speed, had been collecting a couple of cups and plates, a tin of milk and one of cocoa. As she turned to the door Mellor softly begged her to wait until he had switched off the lights.

"There are glass panes in the front door. The stream of light might be seen by someone standing outside."

Noiselessly the two women fled, lit up the other sitting-room, and Chris dragged out some work and flung a book or two into prominence before hurrying to the door and opening it. She could not have told what or whom she expected to find without, but most certainly the apparition of Eleanor was a complete surprise. She was looking gloriously handsome, but half-distracted. She wore an evening gown of a rich blue and a wrap crusted with gold embroidery and edged with sable.

At sight of Chris, she uttered a hysterical cry, darting in and catching her by the wrists. "Then you haven't!" She wrenched the other round so that the light fell full upon her face. "You haven't heard—you don't know? . . . Ah, thank God! It can't be true!"

Chris turned pale as death. She fell back against the panels of the locked studio door. "What is it? What can't be true?" she cried.

Eleanor burst into speech—"I didn't mean to come! I couldn't help it! Forgive me! Forgive me! . . . You must think me raving mad, I know you will—you do! But this was so awful, so crushing, so *unbearable*——" . . . with which she allowed Chris to snatch from her hand the bit of crumpled, apparently tear-blotted paper with its fatal news. She continued to babble out excuses and entreaties—"even at the risk of being put outside the door she must come where she could hear a human voice—have a touch of sympathy——"

Chris, shaking from head to foot, stood there and read it . . . feeling the mists of numbness steal upward to her brain as though to paralyse her alertness and put her caution and her suspicions to sleep.

. . . Suppose the secret police had not insisted upon those precautions! . . . Suppose they had allowed old Jane to go blundering to the door to be met by a blow like this!

Mingled with her agony there struggled in her the determination not to be overwhelmed. Even at that poignant moment she was able to see how much her own collapse might mean at that crisis. There was a wild, insurgent hope that possibly the news was fabricated with that intent—a hope rejected as soon as formed. Eleanor had loved Rolf, and must therefore be incapable of such baseness as that.

She conquered her sick shuddering and pulled herself together.

Eleanor, when she seemed about to fall, had flung her arm behind her to support her, and they were standing thus, close together, right against the studio door. With her free hand, Eleanor turned the handle, and pushed. "Why," said she swiftly, "this door is locked."

"Yes. We always lock it at night . . . . we are alone in the flat, and there is a way along the leads . . . into that room. We think it's safer. Come this way. Jane and I sit in my room of an evening."

As she led in the visitor, Jane rolled off the couch, yawning and dropping her novel to the floor.

"Whatever is the matter, Chris? You seem very excited over something—— Hallo! Miss Carmichael!"

She was on her feet, and Chris wondered at her for doing it so well. "Miss Carmichael brings terrible news," she managed to say, and turned away shivering with the effort to control herself. She was brought round completely, however, by the effect of the news upon Jane, who burst into agonies of weeping, while Eleanor, having glanced all about her and finding no sign of any unusual perturbation in the normal course of the two ladies' lives, renewed her apologies, and

began to declare that she was sure the rumour must be unfounded, otherwise Mrs. Holderness would have had a telegram from the War Office.

She was eager to be gone, for her mission had sickened her. Yet even in her repugnance she realised how clever Max had been. That attempt on her part to enter the studio had told her what she came to find out. She had no doubt at all that the plans were there; and the window was accessible from the leads, just as Ritter's man had alleged. Chris doubtless knew all about the plans. Jane as evidently did not. They both imagined themselves to be quite safe and unwatched.

Eleanor escaped as soon as she was decently able, earnestly beseeching that if they received any news they would let her know at once.

She left behind her a Chris who hardly knew herself. As she fastened the flat door after her visitor, she was staring into her own heart, aghast at what she found there. She had supposed that, if Rolf should fall in the war, it would be a providential means of escape for her. And now—now it seemed to her that from beginning to end she and he had misunderstood the whole situation, and that they could never explain, never unravel the problem of their mistake.

She was forgetting everything, except the final moment in his arms—that moment upon which she was constantly assuring herself that she must not build any hope.

She was sick and shivering as she dragged herself back to the room where the men were hidden, tapped upon the door, and begged them to admit her without making a light.

It was at about two o'clock in the morning that Captain Holderness reached Carisbrook Mansions.

He carried only a hand-bag, for he could obtain no vehicle and had cloaked his luggage at Waterloo. He

had dispatched a telegram from Southampton, and, not being familiar with the present state of the telegraphic service in his native land, he made no doubt that he was expected. It was therefore no surprise at all to him when he found the hall porter on the watch, though he was gratified by the noiseless rapidity with which he was admitted.

The man, who was either but half awake, or had been solacing his vigil with something stronger than water, glanced at his khaki with a sly grin, and said, as if it were a joke, "Anzac, ain't you?"

To this question, which appeared to Rolf to be obviously derisive, he naturally replied, "Not 'alf!"—which appeared to be a highly satisfactory repartee, for the inner door was at once opened, the man even winking at him, and muttering very softly:

"Fourth floor. I daren't take the lift up this time o' night, as you may guess. Better go up without your boots—eh, young feller-me-lad?"

Apart from the lack of respect to an officer disclosed in this address, the bootless idea seemed rather on the side of overdoing one's consideration for the slumbers of the inhabitants. But if the porter deemed it advisable, Rolf had no objection. The stairs were nicely carpeted, and his boots were distinctly reminiscent of the trenches.

As he sat on the lowest stair unlacing them, the porter tiptoed up to him and whispered, "Door's unfastened. Just turn the 'andle, it'll open without a sound."

"One would think burglary was the idea," was the inward reflection of the young officer, but he nodded comprehendingly, found a shilling which seemed to give not only pleasure but surprise; and then, boots in one hand and haversack in the other, he noiselessly mounted to the fourth floor.

It was a little puzzling to hear that the flat had been left open for him to enter. It seemed to infer that no one was waiting up to receive him, and this cheerless forecast gained strength as he arrived and saw no glimmer of light through the half-glazed door.

As he mounted the endless stairs, his shyness had increased; and now that he actually stood upon his wife's threshold, he halted, and the perspiration broke out upon him.

Everything was so still. Not a sound in that great range of bricks and mortar, which he knew to be packed with people on every floor. The silence was somehow dreadful. He got the notion that someone hidden and stealthy was awaiting him—just pausing till he should turn the handle of the door before springing upon him.

X

COULD this be the wrong number? He glanced at the gilt digits, faintly illumined by the glimmer of gas on the public staircase. It was No. 6 all right.

But in any case he could put it to the proof by turning the handle. If the porter had been instructed to let him know that the door was on the latch, it seemed that, for some reason unknown to him, he was not to knock or ring.

He had come home full of indecision and embarrassment—eager to do all he could to atone, but extremely doubtful as to how much he would be allowed to attempt. Chris's letters had been discouraging—self-contained—full of a dignity for which he had not been prepared.

He had long ago admitted to himself that he had not understood her. He was willing to set himself to the task of learning, if she would permit.

What he hoped for, but dared not expect, was some sudden melting—some uprush of sentiment at the sight of him—which might move her as she had been moved when they parted, and make everything easy.

Standing there, bootless, upon a particularly prickly cocoa-fibre mat, he foresaw little chance of any such thing.

Seeking in his mind for some explanation of the silence, the darkness, the absence of welcome, he could only suppose that his wife's daily labours were of so arduous a character as to render unbroken sleep necessary for her at night. The idea of the non-arrival of his telegram could not suggest itself, since the porter had been on the look-out for him.

After some miserable minutes of indecision, he suddenly made up his mind. He had been given clear directions. He was to admit himself. He did so. The door gave without a sound. He stepped in, also without a sound, put down his boots, and stood listening.

The air was warm, after the draughty staircase, and a breath of the scent of hyacinths travelled to his weary senses like the greeting of home. All was still, however, and all was absolutely pitch dark. He had no idea of the internal structure of the flat, nor did he know where to find the switches. He stood for some ridiculous moments, passing his hand up and down the wall, and realising that he was in a space of no great width. Then he bethought him of his electric torch—found it, and set his thumb upon the button.

The light revealed a passage, perhaps twelve feet long, which led to a square vestibule, or lounge, of no great size, but considerably wider than the place in which he stood. It struck him, idiotically, that there were unseen persons stationed behind the angles of the wall on either hand, so that when he moved forward,

he would be caught. This feeling was so strong, and so unaccountable—the whole situation seemed to him so unaccountable—that he remained where he was for quite an appreciable time, seeking to steady his mind.

Suddenly it occurred to him that some message might have been left for him, and he glanced quickly to his right, where a narrow table stood against the wall, holding a tray for visiting cards. In the tray was a slip of paper, and upon it were written these words:

"Walk straight on and open second door on the right."

A curious thrill succeeded his late gloom. *Was this her message?* His heart began to hammer furiously. He forgot that he was weary, hungry, heart-sick—travel-worn and unkempt. He thought only of what lay before him—of what he might find if he obeyed those directions . . . of a haven of refuge—a welcome, shy, secret, exquisite—something that should put an end for ever to the nightmare in which his soul had wandered ever since his wedding-day.

There sprang up in his heart, as though someone had drawn back a curtain, the face of his wife as Blundell had painted her. The portrait had been reproduced in several illustrated papers, and he had cut out more than one copy. He seemed to see her soft mouth and pleading eyes—her child's face, eloquent of such mystery, such high promise, that he felt at one and the same moment the lover's sense of unworthiness, and the lover's determination to win.

He glanced right and left. No doors opened from the entrance passage. The second door on the right must be in the vestibule. As he stepped forward, torch in hand, he saw them both, demurely closed. He approached the second with his heart in his throat, and had almost gained the threshold when he saw that it was opening slowly from within.

His pent-up excitement released itself in a sound—a low cry—but it was snapped off short and sharp; and then everything happened in an instant.

He became aware, in a horrible moment, that the person who was creeping with infinite stealth from the room he sought was Blundell. The light of the torch showed him with awful clearness, but left the face of Rolf in deepest shadow. Just as his call of love was changing to a growl of fury, Blundell sprang upon him, and simultaneously someone else gripped him from behind, and stifled all sound with an iron arm across his mouth. There was no noise but a soft shuffling. It seemed to him that his assailants were at least three in number; and though he fought and writhed, he could not prevent them from pushing him through the door, into the room—where they tied him up and gagged him with ease and dexterity. The silence of it all made the thing incredibly daunting. Fatigue, over-stretched nerves, hunger and furious resentment combined to send the blood to his heart in a flood that wiped out consciousness. As he slipped off helpless into the void, he heard low whispers pass between his captors.

"Jove, that was a near thing!"

"Nearer than you think! Hark! There goes the signal!"

Then all tailed off into uttermost silence.

Rolf opened his eyes at last to a consciousness of daylight. His faint had doubtless passed into the sleep of exhaustion. He lay upon his back upon a kind of divan—not very uncomfortable—and stared up at the ceiling. He was tied with flat strips of canvas, which did not cut, but were extremely rigid. He could, however, move his head from side to side; and he began to examine his surroundings.

The room in which he found himself was not a bed-

room. For some reason which at the moment he was unable to remember, this fact gave him pleasure. He remarked with some surprise that upon the walls hung two or three of his own best pictures. The general effect of the furnishing charmed him, and all the more when he reflected that it was probably Chris's own sitting-room. Then where was Chris herself?

Were burglars in possession of the flat as he had fantastically supposed overnight? Was she lying, gagged and bound, in some other apartment? To oppose any such notion, there came to him sharply the memory of his glimpse of the face of Blundell—hawk-like, vindictive, triumphing.

He thought he saw a solution. His wife and Blitz had decided to go away together. But something must have interrupted their arrangements—perhaps his telegram?

Blitz must have returned to make final dispositions —to leave directions for him—to see that he was admitted—and as he, Rolf, had got home earlier than he had foreseen, it had seemed to Blitz necessary to dispose of him forcibly.

His methods had been ungentle, to say the least of it . . . and since when had Blitz commanded a band of desperadoes?

"If I had known how things were, I would have stood on one side," he thought miserably; and mentally kicked himself for not having realised the position before. Blitz had fallen in love with Chris at first sight. The portrait he had achieved was a proof of the strength of his passion. Rolf had known it the moment his eye met that of his former friend in the light of his electric torch.

He was conscious of gnawing pain in his interior. How long was he likely to have to lie here, trussed up and ravenous? He had gone past hunger, and felt

merely sick and wretched. He guessed it to be very early morning, judging from the slant of a sunbeam which streamed through the casement window.

Then, like a reprieve, he heard the sound of voices. A door somewhere had opened, and a sound as of several people in animated discussion travelled out and seemed to approach. He caught such fragments as:

"Good-bye, good-bye! We may congratulate ourselves, I think!"

"Neat, wasn't it?"

Then a deep male voice: "Mr. Blundell did the best, though——"

A feminine note, surely Jane Lockett? *"What* do you say? Sent one of them up the public staircase?" and after a resultant babel of chatter—"What! Left the creature in Chris's parlour? Oh, *really!"*

Blitz said something, laughing. Blitz seemed to be on the crest of the wave. His voice was hilarity personified. Then at last the handle of the door turned. Several people were entering. A strange voice remarked:

"Jove! Another one in khaki! That's their favourite game——"

"Oh, poor chap!" in Jane's kind tones; the actual sight of the prostrate foe evidently melted her at once. "Untie him at once, please."

Two persons came forward, two strange faces bent over the young officer and began to release his aching limbs. Then, with a startled cry, Blundell strode forward. The eyes of the two men met, and there was something in Rolf's which turned his friend white as paper.

"Jane!" he gasped, chokingly, "Jane! What have we done? Look here! It's—it's Holderness!"

There was a stupified silence, lasting perhaps three ticks of the clock. Then Jane rushed to the divan, flung

her arms about Rolf, lifted his head to her shoulder, and with shaking hand began to stroke his hair. "Oh, my boy, my poor dear boy! What have they done to you?" she cried, shaken with feeling. Then, checking herself suddenly—"Blitz! Blitz! On your life, keep this from Chris until he's come to himself again. It would kill her to see him like this, on the top of all she's just gone through! Rolf, dear boy, there's been some ghastly mistake! Speak to me! D'you know old Jane?"

"Water!" he managed to gasp; and in a moment, everyone was on the move, hastening to obtain relief for him. Hot milk was fetched, and he was made comfortable with a pile of cushions, and an eider-down snatched off somebody's bed, while Jane chafed one of his cold feet and Blitz the other.

After an interval, Jane looked up from her ministrations to beg the chief of the secret police to take his men to the kitchen, and keep Mrs. Holderness busy there, making cocoa for them. After they had left the room, Rolf just lay still and did not even think. Jane put a hot-water bottle to his feet, and fed him assiduously. After a while, the comfort sent his blood once more circulating through his veins, and his apathy was succeeded by a devouring curiosity.

"What in the name of wonder were you all playing at last night?" he asked faintly.

"My dear, we were spy-catching," replied Jane willingly. "I will leave Chris to tell the story, for it's her affair, and not mine. Between them, she and Blitz have caught Max Ritter red-handed. I'm feeling pretty bad about it, for it means that he will be shot out of hand. The secret police have sent men to raid his rooms which they were never allowed to do before. . . . They ought to shoot the beast who went surety for him, but as he's a Member of Parliament, one knows what will

happen. The whole transaction will be kept out of the Press. Blitz may get a knighthood, but everyone will think it's for his painting, and not because he saved a valuable secret for his country."

"Chris," whispered Rolf, after digesting this amazing news. "She's safe?"

"Yes, she's safe. But she had a shock last night. That fiend Eleanor Carmichael rushed in to tell her you had been blown to pieces by a bomb."

He crimsoned. "Eleanor said that? What the devil did she know about it?"

"Have you," said Blitz in lifeless tones, "been corresponding much with Miss Carmichael?"

"Good Heavens, Blitz, what do you take me for? Certainly not."

"Your wife will be glad to feel sure," replied Blundell in a voice whose full significance Rolf was at the time far from understanding.

Jane rose to her feet. "The police are going," she muttered hastily.

"Jane!" cried Rolf, "For pity's sake! Keep Chris away until I'm clean! Could one have a bath by any chance?"

"Geyser," replied Jane promptly. "Ten minutes." She whisked out of the room and the two men were left together.

Blundell sat forward in his chair, staring at the floor. Then quite suddenly he straightened himself and met Rolf's eyes like searchlights, raking him.

"I think," said Blitz bluntly, "that I am justified in asking you for a plain answer to a plain question. Do you love your wife? Do you want her? . . . Because, if you don't—well, I do."

"Oh, confound you, Blitz, how dare you talk like that to me?" Rolf sprang to a sitting posture, gathered as if to spring upon his friend.

Blundell did not move, and his eyes met Rolf's quite steadily.

"I've nothing to be ashamed of," he said simply.

"There's the difference between us, for I have," was the slow reply, while the soldier flushed crimson. His voice failed a little, but after a moment he went on: "I can't decide; and you can't. It's for her to say. I want her, right enough . . . if she'll take me. But if she would rather have you . . . Why, I own you're the better man."

"Yes, I am," returned Blundell coolly. "Only, unfortunately, she loves you, you see."

At the moment, the bell of the flat rang. They heard light footfalls going to the door, and the sound of low suppressed voices in eager talk. Through it pierced a sudden high note:

"Max! Taken? They've taken him?". . .

The two men glanced uneasily at one another. Blundell rose to his feet and took one or two steps towards the door. It was flung open at the moment by someone without, and Christian Holderness came in, followed by Eleanor Carmichael.

XI

ALL his life after Blundell remembered Chris's face as she came in, stopped short, and stood there in the early sunlight—it was about half-past seven—taking in the miracle of her husband's presence.

Though she had been up almost all night, she was daintily fresh in her rose-coloured overall and delicate collar.

Her expression was indescribable, all her soul seemed to have passsed into her eyes.

Rolf, at her entrance, had leapt to his feet; but at first

he could hardly stand, and sank down in a sitting posture upon the edge of the divan, while, for a space in which one might count ten, he and she gazed at each other. He must have seen something in her expression which flung him off his guard. All dishevelled as he was, his face still red with the stricture of the gag, he lifted himself, strode stiffly up to his wife as if nobody else had been in the room, and caught her in his arms. His head was so stooped over her that nobody could see either his face or hers; and with his left arm he drew her towards the door which he pulled open with his right.

"You'll excuse us, I know," came his voice, in accents muffled by the fact that his mouth was hidden in Chris's hair; and so they passed from sight, and he shut the door after them with a bang.

Eleanor and Blundell were left, staring upon one another.

"Eleanor Carmichael," said Blitz fiercely, "if you meddle there, your soul will go to destruction everlasting."

She looked at him like a hurt child, and burst into hopeless tears.

"I won't meddle, I won't!" she sobbed, "and it wouldn't be a b-bit of good if I tried. He belongs to her —can't you see it? Why, I have written to him, five or six times, since he went back to France, each letter more moving than the last, but he has never answered! He's hers, I tell you—hers! And I," she dried her eyes and spoke with sudden defiance, "I don't mind half as much as I thought I did, because I'm delivered from Ritter."

"Ah!" said Blitz, "I knew it! Then he was blackmailing you?"

She nodded without speaking, sinking down upon a chair as if she could hardly stand.

After a longish silence she asked, "When did Rolf come?"

Blundell smiled ruefully. "He got a queer reception, poor lad! We felt fairly certain that Ritter would have bought the porter, so as to pass another man into the flat, or have him ready just outside in case of any unlooked-for defence, or struggle. One of our men found out that they had told the porter that Mrs. Holderness's husband was coming home suddenly and wanted to take his wife by surprise—he would arrive in khaki, and the word would be—'Anzac.' We decided that this programme should be carried out, as we could trap the man so introduced quite neatly; and we put a message in the hall, directing him where to go when he got in. Holderness must have arrived at the critical moment, and the porter having admitted him, doubtless went straight to bed and never heard the real man knock. We were all lying in wait, and poor old Rolf was gagged and trussed up before he had time to make a sound. As the marauders entered from the leads almost immediately after, we had not time to examine our captive, we were too busy——"

"Max risked coming in person——"

"He had to, for the reason that he could trust nobody else to decide whether the plans were bogus or genuine. He had a strong notion that I was on to him, but could not be sure. He thought I might have left a decoy set of plans lying about. So he came himself, to make certain; and so I fear he has looked his last upon the sun. Well! he was a brave man! And he has died for his country. May his sins be forgiven him."

"I can't—I can't—pray that yet," muttered Eleanor; "but I'll try, Blitz—I'll try—because I'm a free woman now."

Rolf had not in the least meant to act so precipitately. He had every intention of remaining calm and detached,

and telling his wife nobly that she must do as she thought right—and as her own heart dictated. But the mere sight of her, with those pathetic eyes still shadowed with the purple undermarkings of last night's weeping, scattered all his presence of mind.

He only knew that she was there, and that he must have her—must win her at any cost. When they found themselves alone together in the passage, he gave her not a moment in which to call him to order—he spoke without a second for reflection.

"Am I to go, or stay? You must decide, this instant. If you let me stay, even five minutes—if you let me kiss you—even once—you'll have to put up with me for the remainder of your life! . . . But, if you'd rather have Blundell" . . .

Jane, hurrying to announce to her patient that his hot bath was ready, found the passage blocked by a tableau which almost deprived her for the moment of sense or speech.

She had just enough presence of mind to turn and bolt, scurrying away and into the first open door she found, which was, as it happened, the scullery.

"Anywhere to be out of their way," she muttered. "Oh dear, everything seems to come at once! I feel quite unstrung. However, so long as it's all right . . . and thank God, it is! It is!"

III

HER FINAL CHOICE

I

WITH a sigh of relief, the head forester drew rein at the Popa's door.

It was one of the first hot days. The glorious sunshine of June brooded over the wild Rumanian uplands.

At the house of Gregor, the popa (or vicar of the parish), there was sure to be a pint of golden wine, ice-cold from the cellar, for Marko Cornara, head forester to the Count Berilescu, whose castle turrets peeped from the rolling woodlands which he owned as far as the eye could reach.

Marko sat his great black horse arrogantly. He was a man over thirty, with a hawklike nose, blazing dark eyes, and a black moustache which drooped over his mouth, and seemed thereby to hide his thoughts. He wore a brown suit and riding gaiters, a slouch felt hat shading his formidable countenance. He was a widower, and in the hamlet of Krilin it was rumoured that he had ill-treated his wife.

All was very still at the popa's unpretending little cottage, set in a garden sweet with summer flowers. The cries of the peasants who were mowing in the distant hayfields came faintly to the ear. Even as he lifted up his voice and shouted, Cornara reflected that both the popa and old Meska, his housekeeper, were probably hard at work there with them.

As he feared, no answer came to his peremptory summons; and he was just about to turn away, when a slight sound within the house arrested him.

The door stood open. Down the dusky passage someone was approaching—a young girl, slender with an elegance, moving with a grace, clad with a taste wholly unknown in and around Krilin.

Cornara held his breath.

She came out into the porch, and the fierce sun fell upon her burnished bronze hair, her thick bronze lashes, and her simple gown of brown holland.

She wore a soft lawn collar, which fell away from a throat as round as a column, but so small that his one big hand could have spanned it. In her tan belt she had thrust a deep red rose. Below the hem of her skirt her small feet were shod in tan shoes with buckles.

Before he was aware, the head forester had doffed his hat. At the same time he was jeering at himself for the action, for this could be none other than Gregor's daughter, and how absurd for the head forester to be capping it to the daughter of a village popa!

The old fool Gregor had lavished all his savings upon sending away his only child to be educated in Bucharest. That terrible year when the crops failed and typhoid was epidemic in the village, he had been forced to borrow—to borrow from Cornara! There was humour in the thought which came as the widower gazed upon the girl in the porch. His money had helped to produce this.

She lifted to him a perfectly serene face, lit by grave dark blue eyes.

"What is your will, sir?" she asked quietly, not impressed, as it seemed, by the imposing figure on the great black horse.

He stared at her with eyes which meant to be very eloquent, and his heart began to hammer against his ribs.

"Why, saints help us, this must be Alix—little Alix —eh?"

"I am Alix Delid"—with no answering smile. "You wish to see my father? He is, unhappily, not at home, but I can give a message."

"So! You do not remember me?"

"I fear not. What name shall I say?"

"Thou hast been long away, lass."

The familiar form of address evidently both surprised and offended her. She made no reply.

"Dost thou not remember, as a child, coming to my house with messages from thy father?"

"I—I believe I remember madame your wife," she replied, after reflection. "Had she a little girl called Drina?"

His brows knit angrily.

"She had. The child is now in the care of her mother's family. My wife is dead. Now, would it be too much to ask of thee, in thine elegance, that I might have a drink before I go on?"

Alix coloured.

"Pardon, sir. I forget the hospitable customs of Krilin. I will fetch some wine."

She disappeared, leaving behind her a man whose senses were frothing like yeast. This was a beauty, there was no other word for it—a beauty—and apparently knew something of her own value. And she, in accordance with orthodox custom, would be allotted as a bride by her father to Dmitri Lassin, the loutish son of the popa in the next village. No, by the splendour of heaven! He, Marko, would have her! He had been married, hatefully, cruelly, at the instigation of others, while still a youth. Now, in his manhood, he would marry to please himself. A shiver of ecstasy ran through him as he pictured himself lord of this dainty creature. It was a foregone conclusion. If he

wished for her, she was his. He had a financial hold upon her father.

When Alix returned, she found him dismounted, leaning against the porch, which creaked a little under the weight of six-foot-three of brawn and sinew. He had removed his hat, and his black hair lay in damp rings upon his forehead. The girl carried a tray, bearing a green bottle, already opened, and a glass. The bottle was frosted over with the intense cold of the cellar below. Depositing the tray upon the bench, she poured the amber fluid into the glass with a tempting gurgle. He took it from her with a fiery look, completely wasted, since she was not looking at him.

"To thy health and happiness, Alix. Art glad to be back in thy native village?"

The girl's face clouded.

"I am glad to see my father again," she replied evasively.

"This little tumble-down place is no fit frame for a beauty like thine," he answered eagerly. "But thou wilt not remain here long, I warrant."

His open compliment annoyed her further, but she put it down to boorish lack of manners.

"I am content here," said she shortly.

"So they all say, the pretty tempting darlings, until someone carries them off to a home of their own," he cried gaily, evidently unconscious that he was giving offence.

With a flourish he put down his glass, and paused looking at her as he wiped his moustache with his handkerchief.

Alix stood waiting for him to go, with a curl of the lip which, once seen, he could not fail to interpret. Like a flash, a maddening thought flew with the wine to his hot head. She scorned him! She, the popa's

daughter, stood there politely despising the greatest man in Krilin!

Before she was aware of his intention, he caught her roughly by the arms.

"I must welcome Alix on her return," said he breathlessly; and kissed her.

She did not scream nor flee. She made a sound which caused him to release her quickly—a sound not of rage nor fear, but of contemptuous disgust. She held a little handkerchief to her outraged mouth.

"Faugh! You despicable coward! Because I am alone in the house you venture to insult me! My father shall know how you return his hospitality."

He began to laugh, trying to hide from himself his rage and shame.

"Hear her! Hear our little maid, our country mouse turned town mouse! My girl, I warn you that you had better dismount at once from that high horse which is far too expensive a beast for our good Gregor to keep in his stable. Do you know who I am? Better not make an enemy of Cornara, I warn you."

She stood mute and lovely, simply scorning him; as too far above him to be timid or even angry—feeling, in brief, merely contempt.

The lash of her unspoken opinion of him made every nerve in his body tingle. Saints! The joy of seeing that look change to one of fear, of appeal! To prove to her that he was master! That would be worth living for indeed!

"Your father shall know," he mocked, his foot in the stirrup. "Indeed he shall, for I will tell him myself the welcome his daughter had ready for his oldest friend."

She vouchsafed no reply. She only shrugged her shoulders slightly, as who would say, "What do your threats matter to me?" And, turning, she moved

slowly away into the shadow of the interior, with no word of farewell.

She was, nevertheless, very angry as the sounds of his horse's feet died away down the little mossy avenue, and she returned to her sitting-room and her occupation.

Gregor Delid, her father, was almost a stranger to her. He had sent her away from him, when she was ten years old, as the only reparation he could make to her for the misfortune of her birth. In the Eastern Church the parish clergy are drawn from a humble class.

When young the popa had been so handsome a young man as to excite remark wherever he went. The daughter of a gentleman had been so ill-advised as to fall in love with the angelic-faced youth in the town where he went to study before taking orders. They made a runaway match, and the resulting union was not happy. The young wife had no greatness of mind to enable her to surmount the ostracism of her class. She was likewise of a poor constitution, and she died while her little girl was still a child.

The popa had a sister who, like himself, by reason of her great personal beauty, married above her station. Unlike him, she was a woman of character, well fitted for the task of bringing up her motherless niece. She lived in Bucharest, and, in her care, Alix had the advantage of a very good education. The distance made any return home for the holidays out of the question, and it is doubtful whether Alix would have even now returned had not her aunt died. Alix had brains as well as beauty, and was already making a little money by writing stories for the magazines.

She found her life at Krilin more uncongenial than she had foreseen. Her father and she were practically strangers; and his parishioners, if Cornara were to be taken as a sample, were indeed a poor exchange for

the society of the university to which she had grown accustomed.

The parsonage was a wooden cottage containing four rooms on the ground floor. One of these was her father's living-room, one his sleeping-room, the third was the kitchen, and the fourth designed for a bedroom, but Alix was turning it into a sitting-room. Two large garrets above served as bedrooms for Meska and herself, and she was busily engaged in the fashioning of chintz covers and curtains and the general improvement of her surroundings.

The insolence of the head forester, however, had so unsettled her that she snatched a wide-brimmed hat and went out from the back of the house into the woods of Vondo, which spread half round the outskirts of Krilin, clothing in beauty the lower slopes of an outlying spur of the Carpathians, which rose majestic to the north and west of the upland village.

II

THE Lord of Vondo seldom inhabited the large mansion which raised its turrets of yellow stone above the hillside pines. In the earlier days of his married life, circumstances had caused it to be distasteful to Count Berilescu to make any long stay at Krilin. It was not until after the death of Cornara's wife that he could visit his country seat without uneasiness.

Alix Delid, as may be supposed, knew nothing of this, nor of the scandal connected with the head forester's first marriage. Yet, as she roamed among the forest trees, it was of Laura Cornara that she was thinking.

She had sometimes been sent, when a child, to carry little delicacies or a few flowers to the forest lodge, and a picture of its interior, as she remembered it, rose before the eyes of her mind. She remembered a young

woman who was usually in bed—thin and stooping, racked with a cough. Her great black eyes seemed to bulge from her head, under the shadow of a mop of dry, blonde hair which always reminded the child of a straw thatch.

She had been too young to know that the abrupt scarlet of cheeks and lips was artificial. Sometimes the withered hair was bent up in curling-pins, and the dirty nightdress torn. Sometimes, on the contrary, the head overflowed with wispy curls, and a gaily coloured bed-wrap half concealed the wasted frame. There was also the whining, disobedient child called Drina, whose face usually needed washing.

It occurred to Alix now, for the first time, that the man whose domestic hearth was thus furnished was to be pitied rather than blamed. Perhaps his unhappy marriage had soured him, and made his manners odious, as now they were. Even this reflection, however, did not enable her to pardon the fact that he had failed to see that she was no village girl, no subject for his coarse jokes.

Her anger cooled, however, as the peace of the great forest flowed into her soul. Her feet were on golden moss; she strayed in a sunshine-haunted glade of silver birch, drawn on by the song of a little brook, which she heard though she could not see it.

Suddenly the evening calm was broken—rent by the last sound she could have expected to hear in that haunt of quiet—the shriek, loud and piercing, of a woman in agony.

For a moment terror held her feet. She felt certain that somewhere, close to her, murder was being committed. Then, as the sound continued, she rallied from her momentary panic, and ran in the direction whence came the repeated screams.

She crossed the little rise which had hidden the brook

from her sight. By its margin, crouching on her heels, was a girl about her own age, whose face was distorted with terror and pain. Alix, rushing to the rescue, saw with horror that one of the little gemmed hands was caught in the steel teeth of a trap, half concealed in the long grass.

So atrocious was the victim's torment that she took no heed of her deliverer; she did nothing but shriek, sweat rolling from her forehead, as she writhed and twisted in her agony.

"I can free you—I can free you!" cried Alix desperately. I know how to open it. Keep still, I pray, and I'll set you free"

There followed a breathless moment while she tore at the spring with desperate fingers; then the jaws of the horrible trap opened, and the screams grew yet more agonised as the delicate flesh was torn anew.

It seemed the crowning horror that, even then, the hand remained impaled upon the hideous fangs. In face of those piercing cries, Alix half feared she would not have the courage to disengage it; and then, just as she nerved herself to the effort, suddenly all sound ceased and the girl fainted with anguish and exhaustion.

Conquering her shrinking, the popa's daughter then released the mangled limb, her mind questioning anxiously as to what would be the best thing to do next. The wounds were filthy with rust and other dirt, and she knew they should be promptly cleansed, or they would poison. Yet any help was so far away that she thought it not safe to leave the girl alone for so long a time as it would take her to reach the castle on one side, or the village on the other. Meanwhile, it struck her that to hold the injured hand in the running water of the brook would not only cleanse it, but possibly, by numbing, dull the pain for the time.

She half rolled, half dragged the patient down to

the very margin of the stream, cut away the ridiculous sleeve of flowered ninon and thin lacy net, and, stretching the body full length upon the verge, laid hand and arm in the ice-cold, swiftly flowing current.

As she bathed the brow with a wet handkerchief, she noted the costly details of the stranger's clothes. The hair, black as night, had been arranged by a skilled maid. Diamond solitaires glistened in the ears, which were particularly small and well shaped. The hat, which lay upon the grass near, was of Leghorn straw, and decked with Paris roses. It seemed clear that the young lady must have come from the Castle of Vondo. Alix decided that, if she could walk, it was her duty to take her back there as soon as she revived. There was no doctor in Krilin village, and from the castle the one who lived nearest could be fetched in the car.

The swoon was deep. After a few minutes Alix decided to do her best to tie up the wounded hand before the awakening. Fortunately she had a clean handkerchief with her, which she tore into strips. The unconscious girl was wearing a gauze scarf which might serve as a sling. She had just completed her primitive attempt at first aid when the pansy-dark eyes unclosed.

"Are you suffering a little less now?" demanded Alix quite tenderly; and the other smiled as she gazed into the lovely face bending so sympathetically above her own.

"You are from Vondo, are you not?" went on Alix.

"Yes. I am staying there. I am Floria Lazouli."

"Do you think you could walk with my help? I must take you home at once; no time must be lost in showing your wound to a doctor."

"I'll try," said Floria faintly.

She allowed herself to be helped to her feet. Though small and slender, and ridiculously shod for a forest

ramble, she was evidently healthy and vigorous. After a minute or two her strength came back, and, supported by Alix, she managed to walk. It was a considerable distance, but she held on bravely. The path to the castle, when they struck it, was a good one, and led the two girls straight to a door in a high stone wall which admitted them to the garden.

Upon a wide terrace facing west, three persons were seated—the Count and Countess Berilescu, and the Countess's younger brother, Cyprian Carolyi.

The Berilescus were childless, and the fact embittered their whole lives. The Count, a fine man, not much over fifty, had a life-weary expression. His wife too, a handsome woman still under forty, looked listless and uninterested. Cyprian was a tall, thin, young man, pale of face, and with the stooping shoulders of a student. He was something of a scientist, and cared nothing for war or sport, the usual tastes of a Rumanian noble. All three felt a little out of place at Vondo. The reasons which had brought the family thither were twofold. For two years Europe had been at war.

At first it had been thought that Rumania would "come in." Surely now was her moment to take again to her arms her lost child, Transylvania. But, as the months went on, the scare of war faded somewhat into the background. Now, however, at the beginning of this summer of 1915, it was once more in the ascendant. It was certain that Rumania would fight; the sole uncertainty was—when?

Count Berilescu had to go and summon his headmen, and see that all upon his vast estates rendered themselves to the colours. His brother-in-law also must join his regiment, and return to the military service which he loathed. It was an anxious time for Berilescu, for his estates lay close—too close—to the Transylvanian frontier. They would be in the thick of the fighting

should the incredible happen, and Austria rally to the defence.

In view of his childlessness, the Count intended to make Carolyi his heir. His wife suggested that, if possible, the young man ought to marry before the fighting began. With that intent she had invited the bewitching little Floria Lazouli to the beauty and solitude of the Carpathians; so far, however, quite in vain. Cyprian loved study better than pretty faces. That afternoon a box of books had arrived from Bucharest, and he was deep in a monograph upon comets when the two girls were seen approaching, Floria white and tear-stained, carrying her arm in a sling, and leaning upon the beautiful stranger.

There was general consternation. Floria proved quite unequal to the task of relating what had happened. Her companion was obliged to explain, which she did with complete self-possession, urging that a doctor be at once sent for, and the patient put to bed to recover from the effects of the shock. For a few minutes all was agitation. Servants were summoned, orders given. The Count himself supported their pretty little guest upstairs, his wife following him to see that all orders were duly carried out.

Cyprian Carolyi and Alix Delid were left together upon the terrace, the Countess having laid injunction upon the young stranger not to go, but to await her return and give a fuller account of what had happened.

"A horrible accident," said Carolyi warmly, as he leaned forward towards the chair in which Alix had seated herself. "I wonder my brother-in-law allows such savage traps in his woods."

"The Count," said Alix, "probably leaves all such arrangements to his head forester."

"If his head forester were my servant, I would speak strongly to him," replied the young man, his

look of pity and indignation giving spirit and animation to his usually mild countenance. "It must have been quite an effort on your part to unlock the grisly contrivance."

"As a child, I used to creep into the forest and release the little furry creatures which I found caught," she replied. "I knew how the traps worked."

"You have probably saved Countess Floria from blood-posioning by your fortitude," he replied, gazing admiringly at her. He saw in this woman a blending of beauty and strength which was to him irresistible. He had no eye for a little ornamental person like Floria, but his weak nature reached out instinctively towards Alix. "You have lived as a child in the forest?" he asked, leaning towards her, his chin on his hand.

When the Countess returned, she found the two conversing with animation and interest.

She thanked the rescuer very cordially, and, after listening with attention to her account of the accident—

"Please tell me who you are," she said in a puzzled way. "All this time I am wondering who you can possibly be. There *are* no residents in this place except ourselves."

The girl coloured a little, but answered with quiet dignity:

"I am Alix Delid, and my father is the popa." To give them time to recover from this shock, she added: "I was sent as a child to my aunt in Bucharest, for my education, and have only been home a few weeks."

Count Berilescu had returned in time to hear the announcement.

"Why," said he, turning to his wife, "this must be the daughter of poor Taldia Stepanyis. You remember the romance of her marriage. But I always understood there were no living children."

"I am the only one. Taldia Stepanyis was my mother."

"Indeed, indeed! That accounts for it!" said the Count rather mysteriously.

Carolyi broke in eagerly:

"You lived in Bucharest. Where, may I venture to ask?"

"With my aunt, who was married to Professor Hallin, a great scientist——"

"What! You were brought up in Professor Hallin's household?"

"Yes, I was very happy there; but my aunt died recently, and as the professor had a niece of his own who wished to come and keep house for him, he had no need of me."

"But this solitude," said Carolyi wonderingly, "must indeed be a change to you after the university circles of Bucharest?"

"It is a change," said the girl, with a glimpsed smile.

"This is very interesting," said the Countess kindly.

She urged Alix to stay and dine with them. It was too long a walk all the way back to Krilin; she would reach home far too late for supper. She must stay and hear the doctor's verdict, after which her host would drive her home in the car.

Tired and hungry, Alix willingly accepted. She had made no secret of her identity, and since they were willing, in spite of it, to accept her as a guest, why not?

III

WHEN the popa, weary with a long day's labour in his hay, returned home, it was a distasteful surprise to find Cornara awaiting him, and announcing that he had come to supper. Old Meska, also very tired, grumbled that Alix was not there to lay the cloth.

They waited for her half an hour, then as she did not appear, the two men sat down to their meal.

It was not long before Cornara divulged his purpose. He had seen Alix that morning, and he meant to make her his wife. It was for Gregor to talk of young Dmitri Lasin. Dmitri could look elsewhere. The popa in the neighbouring village had five daughters, any one of whom would do for Dmitri. He, Cornara, was well-to-do, and could afford to give his wife surroundings more suited to her beauty than the hovel in which she was now immured. He looked scornfully at the wooden walls and trestle table. Everything was bare, but everything was beautifully clean and fresh; even Cornara was conscious of a certain charm in a few coloured crocks filled with flowers, in the blue linen window-curtains, and the harmonious colour of the rugs which Alix had brought from Bucharest.

Gregor, when he had recovered from his surprise, had no objection to make. Alix would indeed be lucky, and marrying back more or less into a better class. She would be provided for when his own health, which he knew to be feeble, should fail, as it might do suddenly. Cornara promised that, on his wedding-day, he would cancel the debt which hung menacingly over the meek popa's head. He grew happier and happier. They filled their glasses and drank to the proposed match. When they rose from the table, dusk was falling thickly and Alix had not returned.

Where could she be? Cornara had seen her in the house at about five in the afternoon. She had taken her hat, which was not on its peg, therefore she had gone for a walk. If she had entered the forest it was conceivable that she might have lost her way and be wandering. Cornara, agitated, whistled his dog and asked for a lantern. It would be a delightful adventure to play rescuer, to meet her in the twilight forest glades.

He was just in the act of lighting his lamp, when the humming of a motor was audible. Round the bend of the narrow road swept Count Berilescu's car, with himself at the wheel. The lady beside him, being wrapped in a borrowed coat, was not immediately recognisable; but as the car stopped she leaned out, caught sight of the pale, anxious face of Gregor at the gate, and cried:

"Oh, father, I hope you have not ben worrying! I have been dining at Vondo, and the Count has brought me home!"

"The Count himself!" said Gregor faintly.

In his extreme surprise he could say no more. The chauffeur, coming from the back of the car, assisted Alix to alight and to remove her large coat. She promptly embraced her father.

"I have been inconsiderate. I have given you a fright," she cried in self-reproach.

"I must take all the blame," interposed the Count. "Your daughter has rendered a very great service to the young Countess Lazouli, who is our visitor, and who had an accident in the forest this evening. But for Alix Delid she might indeed have been dead by now." He spoke with feeling. "I am venturing to beg your daughter's company again to-morrow, as the young lady has taken a great fancy to her. With your permission, I will fetch her in the car at half-past two. Now I must say good-night, as I have to drive on and reprimand Cornara."

Upon hearing his name the head forester stepped hastily forward.

"Oh, are you there, Cornara?" said his master, with a sudden and marked change of tone. "That saves me the trouble of going on to your house. What the devil do you mean, sir, by sowing the forest with your deadly traps, as if it were a German minefield? How many of these cursed things have you got strewn

about in the way of young girls' feet? You'll go out to-morrow with the first glimmer of light and take them all up. Do you hear?"

Cornara turned white. Never had he been so addressed before. That it should happen in the presence of the woman he wished to impress, and her father, to whom he was accustomed to condescend, was bitterness indeed. He stepped forward, a mixture of dignity and deference in his manner which became him well.

He said, truly, that it was many years since the Count, or any visitor of his, had used those woods. He had had difficulties with poachers, dogs, and cats, while the rabbits multiplied interminably. Since the methods used did not meet with his Excellency's approval, his Excellency had but to speak. Nobody could regret more deeply than himself the disaster which had befallen.

"Had your Excellency sent me a word to the effect that you had visitors, and that they would be using the wood, I would have seen that all was safe. Last time you came to Vondo there was no house-party, and the forest was not, I think, entered by anyone from the castle."

It was true enough, and the wind was taken out of Berilescu's sails. He had been goaded to rage by Carolyi's severe comments, but now he felt that his indignation had perhaps been overdone. There was no more to be said; he curtly ordered Cornara to see to it, took leave of the Delids, and drove away.

Alix passed her hand through her father's arm, drawing him to the house.

"What is Cornara doing here?" she whispered. "Send him away."

"My child," said Gregor reprovingly, "that is not the way to speak of the head forester. I ought to tell you——"

He broke off and was silent, for they had entered the house, and Cornara, who had preceded them, turned and gave him a look which said very plainly: "Hold your tongue!"

Alix, in the simple holland frock in which she had dined at the castle, stood in the light of the lamp, drawing the pins from her hat. Her motion in thus raising her arms showed the beauty of her form in a way which appealed to the hot-blooded man who watched her.

He was far from her thoughts, except as something from which to escape.

"I am tired, father," she said, "and as you have a visitor I will say good-night at once and leave you to talk to him."

Gregor, in a fume, started forward, but, to his surprise, Cornara laid a hand upon his arm, and himself addressed the girl.

"A disagreeable adventure to befall you in our quiet village," he said, in a voice more gentle than Gregor had ever heard from him. "You are wise to go and rest, though I am unselfish in saying so. Dare I venture to beg that you would be so kind as to show me, to-morrow morning, the trap which injured the young Countess?"

"It will save you time and trouble if I tell you where it is now," was the cold reply. "It is close to the brook, just above the point where two streams join, near the plank bridge. I think you cannot mistake the place; there is much blood there. Good-night!"

As she turned and went away, Gregor wrung his hands; but the forester, clapping him on the back with a smile, drew him into the sitting-room.

"Understand," he said in a low voice, "it is my wish—I should say it is my order—that you say nothing to her of our arrangement. I do my own wooing, my

own way, at my own time. As for Berilescu, he has had enough to say to my affairs in the past; he shall not come between me and this chance of happiness—no, I swear he shall not!" His face when he drew his brows together was formidable; he twisted his mouth like one who nurses a horrid thought. "I know Count Berilescu," he growled. "He is still young enough to delight in beauty like hers—rich enough to pay for the indulgence of his fancy. But she is not like that—no man will have *her* by paying for her. I began the wrong way, but there is still time."

The popa looked at him, mildly bewildered.

"I am not to tell Alix you have asked her in marriage?"

"Not a word. I shall myself tell her when I choose." He took his hat, whistled his dog, and went softly out into the dusk. Half an hour's swift walking brought him to the substantial house upon the forest border, half farm, half lodge, which had been built for him by the Lord of Vondo, when he had sold his soul as a youth of twenty for the post of head forester, its considerable salary, and Laura Pasquin, who had danced in Buda-Pesth, saddled upon him for life as his wife.

In the distant town of Carmonaia, whence he came, his parents had urged him to accept the offer. They had told him it was the chance of a lifetime. There had been no deceit in the case. Marko Cornara knew what he was doing, and that the child to be born should not be his.

Neither he nor the Count was aware at the time that Laura was already in a decline. The fine, pine-impregnated air of Vondo should have cured her, combined with the rest and ease, the abundant food and early hours. It had the opposite result. The girl had lived for excitement, for the nightly stimulus of large audiences, the round of noise and publicity which

she called pleasure. The cessation of all this, joined to her own knowledge of her husband's contemptuous indifference, snapped in her the very springs of vitality. After her child was born she sank into a state of querulous invalidism; and during twelve interminable years Cornara paid, day by day, drop by drop, the full price of his fine house and his lucrative appointment.

He had been brought to Krilin as a stranger; a mere youth, upon whom the Count had unmistakably bestowed high honour. Both these facts created prejudice against him. His domestic tragedy constrained him to hold aloof from other men; and he became more and more unpopular.

By the time Laura died, all that was fine in the man, all that was tender and human, had been trampled down within him.

Now, to-day, he had glimpsed a hope. Something that had slumbered for years awoke and stirred. Should Berilescu, who had tempted him to his misery, stand between him and this dazzling possibility?

IV

ALL the following morning the head forester was busy taking up his traps throughout the forest. He refrained from any further attempt to persuade Alix to go to the scene of the accident with him. He was no impatient boy, but a mature man, strong of will, sure of purpose. He would take no risks.

Alix had gone to tea at the castle. She would return, should she be on foot, by way of the forest, in which case she must leave the grounds through the door in the garden wall. Cornara determined to be near that door, and to await her coming, if it involved a couple of hours.

There were plenty of trees and bushes behind which

he could lurk invisible. He had not been stationed there more than half an hour when the sound of several voices talking and laughing was borne to him over the lofty wall. He heard the gate opened, and cordial words of leave-taking were exchanged, with an appointment for the morrow. Then the latch clicked; he swung his gun to his shoulder, and sauntered on, ready to intercept the girl most accidentally, a little way down the path. Suddenly he stopped short, and an expression of fury flashed over his kindled face. A man's voice was distinctly audible—she was not alone. Concealed behind the trunk of a vast oak, he saw her advancing, escorted by the tall figure of Cyprian Carolyi, who was conversing with absorbed interest.

"You give art too small a place, indeed," Alix was protesting eagerly. "Science may be and do all that you claim for her, but the joy and the grace of life—yes, and its height, too—these we owe to art, do you not agree? Ah, you must! Don't oblige me to label you 'scientific specimen.'"

"Suppose you did label me 'scientific specimen,'" returned Carolyi, with merry eyes, "would that mean that you would drop me into a pigeon-hole and forget me?"

She laughed up at him.

"Something like that. I frankly own that I have no use for the merely scientific. I can say so without being rude, for I know the label does not fit you. I have heard you speak of the Giotto frescoes at Assisi."

The talk died away down the woodland glade, and Cornara stood still and white. His hawk eyes dwelt upon the lithe, young forms moving buoyantly in the dark glooms of the fir arcades. He had seen Carolyi's face, too. It gave him a shock.

It never entered the head of the forester that marriage could be a possibility between those two. He knew

nothing of Alix's gentle blood, and would have laid little stress upon that even had he known. He saw in the man not merely a rival, but a necessarily dishonourable one—to be withstood by any possible weapon. Modern thought and ideas had not penetrated to Vondo. Cornara looked upon every innocent girl of Alix's position as fair game for an unscrupulous noble, and as wholly unable to protect herself.

But that she could babble of art and science with these aristocrats!

The thought gave him a sudden flashing comprehension of what she must be thinking of him. He recalled the fact that he had dared to kiss her, roughly, and with his moustache hardly dry from the wine he had drunk. He had kissed her against her will, as if she had been a peasant. The blood dyed his face darkly as he thought of it. No wonder her manner to him the previous evening had been that of a lady to some negligible clown, to a servant whose master had just rated him in her presence. In the silent forest he clenched his teeth and swore.

It was with an effort of will that he refrained from dropping in that evening at the parsonage. But next morning, soon after breakfast, when Alix was busily at work in her garden, picking peas, she raised her head at the sound of a strong step crunching the gravel, and saw the head forester approaching.

As he advanced hesitatingly, hat in hand, she realised with amusement that she had already succeeded in "putting him in his place."

"Good-morning," she replied negligently to his salutation. "I suppose you have come for a drink. Meska is in the kitchen, I think, and will give you one."

The colour sprang to his very brow, and his eyes glowed.

"I thank you, no," he replied. "I came to inquire after the young Countess. I hope she goes on as well as could be hoped?"

Alix flung him a surprised glance as she continued swiftly to detach the long green pods from their stalks.

"It is difficult to say at present how she is. The doctors are not yet certain whether she must lose her hand, though they hope not."

"Lose her hand!" he cried. "I had not realised that it was so serious."

"Serious enough, I fear," she replied. Then, after a silence, during which he stood his ground, she remarked: "I am sorry, my father is out this morning."

"And you are busy—I merely interrupt," he replied, with some bitterness. "I understand, better than you think. I came here this morning to offer you an apology. When first I saw you, I forgot the years which have run by since your childhood. I took a liberty which I can see that you have not forgotten. But may I beg that you will forgive it?"

"Since you regret your behaviour, I am glad to forgive it," was her reply. She still spoke gravely, but he detected a change in her voice. For the first time she looked at him as if she saw him, and his heart leapt.

"Nothing I ever did made me feel more ashamed," he muttered.

She actually smiled upon him.

"Since you admit it, I may tell you how surprised and how displeased I was," said she. "I had not expected to find you a savage. But let us say no more about it. I hope we shall be friends now."

Vehemently he echoed the hope, adding a plea to be allowed to help gather the peas. She found herself chatting to him before long, with something of interest

—talking of his forest work, his life at Krilin, his unutterable loneliness.

"Your father," said he, "is the only man in the place to whom I care to talk. You made me feel unwelcome the night before last. I thought I had lost my only friend."

With a feeling of some remorse she invited him to come to supper that night and help to eat the peas. He had the wisdom then to take his leave without having said a word to her upon the subject which was burning in his mind, without giving her even the most guarded warning.

Once more she spent the afternoon at the castle, and once more Carolyi walked home with her through the misty twilight. She came in with cheeks faintly blooming and eyes starry. Cornara was already there, sitting with her father. He was dressed with care, had evidently been to a barber, and, to her surprise, was not smoking. He rose when she entered, and his greeting was courteous. She saw her father's look of innocent surprise, and was hard put to it not to laugh.

"You will both be glad to hear," she said, "that the doctor is now fairly certain that he can save Countess Floria's hand."

The cheerfulness engendered by this news helped to make supper a pleasant meal. Alix's story-writing brought her in enough money to enable her not only to dress herself, but to supplement the meagre fare to which the parsonage was accustomed. When they had eaten, they sat by the window which opened on the garden, in the golden radiance of the waxing moon. Alix embroidered by the light of a small lamp, and both men smoked on her invitation. The lamp drew an uncomfortable number of moths, and Cornara amused himself by preventing them from annoying Alix, an occupation which permitted him to gaze his fill upon

her head bent above her work, and her profile outlined against the blue night beyond.

He came again in a day or two, and at the end of a week felt that he had so far advanced in intimacy as to make a hint possible. He had learned at supper that Alix, to whom Floria Lazouli had taken a violent fancy, was going the following day to stay a week at Vondo, that the young lady might have her constant company.

To Cornara, this was a sinister invitation. How much of his foreboding was due to the primal jealousy of the male animal, how much to a real fear for Alix, it is hard to say. Let it be borne in mind that the elder Count's record was known to him, therefore his fear was not groundless.

He sat that evening, his elbow on the table, his chin cupped in his hand, and Alix could not but be conscious of the fire in his sombre eyes. A girl so attractive had not lived to the age of twenty-two in Bucharest without having encountered male admiration. When, on leaving, he suggested that she might stroll with him as far as the gate of the old mossy avenue, she took alarm, and declined lightly, on the plea of having many preparations still to complete before she departed for her visit to Vondo.

Gregor watched and listened, thoroughly puzzled. He hardly knew the head forester in this new aspect. He saw the domineering Cornara leave the room without carrying his point, leave it humbly, though with manifest reluctance. He gazed upon his daughter as upon an enigma.

V

COUNT CAROLYI seemed a changed man. A glow had crept into his mild eyes, which until lately had usually been fixed upon a book. He stooped less. The

forest air, in which he now frequently walked, joined to the drill which he underwent three times a week at Carmonaia, gave colour to his sallow face and filled out his hollow chest. His brother-in-law marked these signs with misgivings.

Like Cornara, Count Berilescu looked upon a marriage between his heir and the popa's daughter as practically out of the question. Cornara, however, had not seen what the aristocrat did see very plainly—namely, that Alix Delid was the type of woman with whom it would be marriage or nothing.

There was a nobility about this girl which was like a bodyguard. Beautiful though she was, base desire could not raise its head in her presence. From such a fate as had befallen Laura the dancer Alix was completely safe. It was probably this knowledge which decided Berilescu to say a few words to Cyprian one night over their wine.

Alix had been for four days the guest of the castle. The moon was now full, and had risen over the mountain heights in majesty, just as the party finished dining. Alix, as soon as they rose from table, went to sit with Floria and read aloud to her. The two men drank their coffee under the verandah in the moonlight.

"Cyprian," said the Count, "I am not one to beat about the bush; nor should I speak did I not think a warning imperatively needed. Alix Delid is a very charming woman, but are you constantly reminding youself that she could never by any possibility become your wife?"

Cyprian bounded to his feet upon the words. He had not known in the least what ailed him, nor why the last week or two of his life had been fraught with a meaning, a delight wholly new in his experience. He gasped like a man unable to swim suddenly thrown into deep water.

"Heavens, Leo, what are you saying?"

"Trying to awaken you to a knowledge of yourself, my boy. You are allowing yourself to fall in love where there is no solution. Marriage and the other thing are in this case alike wholly out of the question."

Carolyi took a long breath, his brain travelling at unwonted speed.

"But why—why is marriage out of the question?" he cried.

Berilescu winced. He had been pretty sure, but this was quick travelling. Cyprian did not attempt to deny, but was evidently eagerly considering the question.

"The girl is not your social equal, and she has no dowry," replied the elder man curtly. "If, as I desire, you take my name, and continue my line, you must marry suitably. On that I shall insist."

The quiet words were heavy with finality.

"Why, Leo, I have always felt it a great honour that you should contemplate making me your heir, but I never looked upon it as a settled thing. There must be other candidates surely for so fine a position? I have really no claim at all but that of affection—my relationship to Myra gives me no rights. You could easily alter your will, could you not?"

Surprise struck the Count absolutely dumb. Could it be? Had this dry young student a capacity for love, the real love, so deep that he would cast aside all his worldly prospects sooner than forgo the woman?

"I cannot believe you serious!" he cried hoarsely.

Cyprian turned round as in wonder at the offence and bitterness of the tone.

"Serious? But that is just what I am," he returned slowly. "If she could care for me, which seems too good to be true. I am not much of a match, if I am no longer your heir. It is not as if I were your own son,"

he went on apologetically. "In that case, I might suppose it right to make your will my law. But it is not so, and I was never ambitious. To live in Bucharest, in Professor Hallin's cultivated set, with her, would fulfil all my desires."

There was a long silence. His brother-in-law laid down the stump of his cigar in his saucer, with the gesture of one who has been hard hit.

"Well, upon my word!" was his only comment.

"These things," said Cyprian softly, "are fate. Yes, though I never believed it until now. No woman before has ever quickened my heartbeats; but with her it began when I looked up from my book to see her coming towards me, upholding poor little Floria so tenderly, her face so divinely compassionate——" He broke off as Berilescu made a gesture of impatience.

"Spare me the transports, for pity's sake! Think things over, you young idiot, before it is too late. You are too dreamy, too unobservant to foresee the miseries of marrying out of your own class. I must get your sister to talk to you."

Cyprian made no reply, for something white was approaching the dark frame of the long window, and a moment later Alix stepped out upon the terrace.

"Floria has taken a fancy to eat a peach," said she, "and I am going to the glasshouses to pluck one for her."

Carolyi sprang to his feet.

"By all means."

"Cyprian," said the Count sharply, "I want you."

"Back quite soon," replied the young man, laughing. "But what a night for a moonlight ramble!"

Berilescu stood looking after the two figures as they disappeared, and grimly reflected that he had precipitated the very thing he wished to prevent. But when the young couple returned twenty minutes later the

decisive words had not been spoken, even in the intoxicating moonlight. The lady of Carolyi's choice was not easy of access, and, having come upon an errand, had no intention of keeping Floria waiting while she dallied in the garden.

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The following afternoon it chanced that Alix Delid walked alone to the parsonage, to carry her father some game.

The Count and his brother-in-law had hastened off that morning in the car to Carmonaia, summoned thither upon urgent affairs. The girl's mind as she walked was full of thrilling excitement, for she guessed that her country had declared war.

She did not linger long, for her father was out. Hardly had she entered the fringe of the forest upon her return journey, when the head forester joined her.

He was more or less at his ease with her now, though he carefully retained his deferential attitude. They greeted to-day as friends, and conversed comfortably.

"It is a long walk for you to the parsonage and back." he said. "Had I known that you could not have the car, I would have brought a horse for you."

"Would you? A horse for me to ride?" she cried, more spontaneously than he had ever heard her speak.

"You like riding?" he questioned lightly.

Indeed she did. Professor Hallin's health had necessitated daily exercise on horseback, and, as he disliked riding alone, Alix had been his constant companion. She owned that the loss of this was to her a considerable drawback to life in Krilin.

"I have a horse which would carry you well," said Cornara, trying to keep the too great eagerness out of his voice. "Which day do you return home?"

"The day, after to-morrow, I suppose. But it may

depend upon the news they bring from Carmonaia to-day."

"Ah! What news is that?"

"They think it is the declaration of war."

"So soon! I understood it would not be until next spring. I wonder what is their plan of campaign? Bulgaria first crushed, then an advance on Transylvania, I suppose?" His voice had changed, and grated oddly. He was a soldier at heart, but at this moment he felt the summons would be hard.

Her voice broke in upon his disjointed thoughts.

"The orders were from the War Office, and they think it means a command for Count Berilescu. He is going to try to get Count Carolyi appointed his aide-de-camp. You know the young Count is not strong. They gave him exemption on the score of ill-health some years ago."

"He seems strong enough now," said Cornara shortly, with a keen look.

"I think the army would be good for him," remarked Alix, quite calmly; "he has studied too much. But he says this mountain air is new life to him."

"I dare say," said Cornara with a scornful laugh; "he is well amused just now."

Something in his tone made her glance up quickly. He was very pale, and his eyes looked larger and softer than usual.

"You may think me impertinent," said he, speaking quietly, with an effect of holding himself in strongly, "but I think I ought to warn you. Your father is too gentle and innocent; he knows nothing of the world, or he would himself warn you that, to people like the Vondo people, you are beyond the pale, as far as marriage is concerned."

"Marriage!" repeated the girl, drawing up her head and using a tone which ought to have warned him. "Is

there any question of marriage? I fail to understand you, Marko Cornara."

While he paused, weighing in his own mind what he could best reply to this, she added, with a shrug of her shoulders:

"Your mind seems to run upon the subject."

He gave a short, fierce laugh.

"It would not be wonderful if it did, for it is a subject upon which I have learned a good deal. Nevertheless, I know I am right to warn you. Those aristocrats will admit you to their table, will show you kindness, will accept your companionship; but they would no more think of an alliance between the heir to the property and yourself than they would think of me as a suitor for the hand of little Countess Floria."

There was a dogged earnestness about his manner which mitigated her anger. It was ignorance, not insolence, she told herself; and she made a real effort to speak gently.

"I am sure you mean kindly," said she, "but I must point out, not only that your warning is wholly superfluous, but also that I don't see that you have any right to speak to me on such a subject at all."

His prudence flew to the winds.

"The right," he burst forth, "of a man who loves you—loves you so that he can neither eat nor sleep for thinking of you. And who is ready to make you his wife, and spend the rest of his life worshipping you! Ah, don't"—as she showed by her expression and gesture that she wished to silence him—"don't condemn me because of the way I behaved. I know I did my best to spoil my chance the first time I saw you. I was just a brute then, sunk in bitter hopelessness that made me reckless. Since then," his voice sank till she could but just hear it—"since then I have been born again."

She stood still, and he saw that there were tears in her dark blue eyes.

"Oh!" she cried, as if she appealed to him to justify her, "but you know I could not listen—you know in your heart that it is useless, don't you? I—I don't want to hurt you, but there must be no mistake. I never saw a man whom I was less likely to marry than you. It is simply out of the question."

He caught her wrists.

"Think!" he urged her stammeringly, the blood rushing to his head as he saw his hopes vanish. Though she tried to free herself, he held her while he poured out a torrent of pleading, of wild words that seemed to shape themselves against his will. He knew that he was not advancing, but injuring his cause, yet he went on; and as he realised that he was not merely failing to move her, but actually stiffening her refusal, he passed from pleas to threats—a piece of folly of which he would not have believed himself capable.

Before he knew it, he was telling her that he was her father's creditor, that if he chose to invoke the parental authority she was his, whether she willed it or no; that he had but to press for the debt and she had no choice, but that if she would marry him freely he was prepared to cancel all.

In his heart he had expected a change of demeanour in her when she realised that marriage was what he offered. He could hardly believe it as he saw her face change from pity to vexation, thence to disdain, and lastly to a fiery indignation.

"That will do, sir," she said at last, speaking with a suddenness of decision which caused him mechanically to loose his hold.

She stood confronting him much as she had stood upon their first encounter, with a courage born of her contempt for her adversary.

"You say my father owes you money? Very well, it shall be paid. I can pay you some of it to-day, more next month—a little regularly until all is made good. But this I warn you. If you go to him and distress him by demanding payment, or by speaking of me—if you say a word to him on this matter, I go to Count Berilescu, who has been my good friend, and I will ask him to pay you in full, that I may have a *gentleman* for my creditor instead of a bully like you!"

Cornara staggered mentally. He saw the whole of his fair dream in ruins about him. Not content with having driven her to reject him, he had proceeded further to make her hate him. In his rage he seized upon her last words, and cried aloud the very last thing he intended to say.

"A *gentleman!*"—laughing loudly. "And what is the difference, please, fair lady, between Cornara and his gentleman master? I will tell you. The difference—it is merely a wedding ring. Both of us will be ready to let you pay in other ways than coin; but I want you for my wife, and he"—sneering—"Berilescu, the notorious man of the world, the man to whom my first wife owed her ruin! He shall be your creditor, shall he, in place of the man who loves you!"

The wild words made Alix flinch. There was in Cornara's manner something desperate, something terribly real. A vague fear stole into her mind, but she retorted boldly enough.

"Now you have insulted both me and the master whom you serve and to whom your loyalty is due. You will probably understand that what you have said puts an end to all question of friendship between us. Kindly allow me to go on alone."

Cornara stood his ground, trembling all over. In his madness he had doubly undone himself. Did Alix but know it, she now held him in the hollow of her hand.

He had taken a solemn oath, under binding pledges, that he held his appointment only on condition of his secrecy. Should he reveal the nature of the compact between himself and his employer he was to forfeit his post. Yet nothing was more impossible than for him to beg Alix not to repeat his words. He made a gesture of despair.

"You have killed me! You have destroyed in me the struggling good that might have grown so strong! You might have made of me anything you would. Now I'm done for, and I don't care what becomes of me!"

She winced away from this spectacle of raw feeling, to her so unheard of, so distressing.

"I shall try to forget," she muttered; and turned from him, walking rapidly on.

But Cornara had more to say when he should have leashed his emotion enough to say it in a steady voice. For this reason he pressed obstinately on beside her, yet without speech, until she lost patience.

"If you insist upon walking with me against my will, I must call you unpardonable!" she cried, almost in tears.

"Call me what you like——" he broke out violently.

The words died away on the evening air, for Cyprian Carolyi, red as fire, pushed through the thick trees that bordered the path, and stood before them.

"You hound!" said the young noble in a choked voice. "How dare you force yourself upon Alix Delid against her will? How dare you offer her the insult of your foul talk? You and I and your master will have this out later. Meanwhile, off with you out of her sight."

Cornara stood a moment like a torrent suddenly frozen in the act of descent. Evidently Carolyi had heard his accusation of Berilescu. He turned so white

that Alix thought he would faint; and, to her own vexation, there surged through her a strange desire to take his part. But he quickly rendered this impossible.

Clearly his reel was spun, and he might as well, he thought, have the satisfaction of hitting back.

"My foul talk!" he echoed—"*my* foul talk! God grant she hear nothing worse—and *feel* nothing worse—among you devils of aristocrats!"

Cyprian stepped quietly forward, took Alix's hand and slipped it through his arm. She was actually in need of support; her knees shook under her.

"No harm that I can keep from her shall befall this lady," said the young Count. "It may interest you to know that it is my highest ambition to make her my wife, if I am fortunate enough to secure her consent, which is a treasure not easily conquered."

VI

In complete silence and arm in arm the two threaded the silent forest path. Alix was fighting tears, and Cyprian himself was in such turmoil of feeling that he was glad to have leisure to collect himself.

They walked as though in a dream, each acutely conscious of the other. It was not until they stood in sight of the door in the castle wall that, as by a common impulse, they halted.

"Alix!" he said, in a voice that broke with the tenderness behind it.

She lifted troubled eyes to his face but found no words.

"It is war," said he, "and that means parting. I have to go off at once—to-morrow—with my brother-in-law, as his aide-de-camp. I might not have dared to speak had not that scoundrel forced my hand. But I

have spoken—and you know. What have you to say to me?"

He took both her hands, but very gently, holding them against his heaving chest. She met his look and found confidence in its gentleness. Here was no primitive man, clubbing his chosen and haling her to marriage by the hair of her head, but a gentleman, who would understand.

"I think you must see," she said stumblingly, "that I am not ready. I mean, I had not thought of this. I want to be quite sincere with you. I don't love you, but I feel that, perhaps, I *might*."

He gave a sigh of relief.

"You feel that you might? And you did not know? Why, I have been in love with you from the first moment of our meeting! I am making an ass of myself, because this is the first time. I'm new to the whole thing. Just how much do you mean, dearest; tell me plainly. Do you mean you will give me a trial?"

She shook her head.

"Not yet. I can't. I must think about you." She coloured beautifully. "I haven't thought much about you," she confessed. "Not nearly as much as one should of the man who asks you to give him your life. And there is something else," she hurried on nervously. "Don't think me stiff-necked; but I will enter no family where I am not welcome. Do you understand?"

It was his turn to colour.

"I do. But, Alix, let me explain. I am my own master, and, in a small way, I am independent. I have means of my own. My brother had the idea of making me his heir. But as far as I am concerned, he is welcome to substitute anybody he chooses."

"Meaning to say that if you married me he would disinherit you?"

Cyprian laughed uncomfortably.

"Oh, he might change his mind, you know. Who can say? In any case, does it matter? He is not my father."

"Yet, but for you, he has no son. He is much attached to you, I have seen it. I have seen something else. You are the one link that ties him and his wife together. If you marry outside your own class you will deal them both a bitter blow. Is not that true?"

After reflection he replied:

"If it is true, does not that help you to see the depth, the reality of my love? I have thought it out, and come to the conclusion that, though other things may be important, love is first." Alix felt acute distress.

"Then I understand that you have discussed this with—with the Count? That he has warned you that such a marriage would mean your disinheritance, and that you—you——"

"I told him the truth, which is that I prefer you to money and position. But there is nothing to worry about. Leo and Myra are, as you say, both attached to me. They cannot fail to grow more and more attached to you. Who could help it? Ah, Alix, put it all out of your head."

"Please, please let me speak! There shall be no trouble of my making on the eve of war! You have to go to-morrow—go unfettered! Let there be nothing between you and them, don't make me a cause of separation!"

Clasping her hands, she looked at him through a mist of tears. His fallen face showed that, if mild, he yet could be obstinate.

"You ask the impossible of me," he said hurriedly. "You think you might love me, though you don't as yet! Then let there be this secret between us! This war is not going to last long; promise that, until I come back, you will give yourself to no other man, that

you will try to learn to care for me? Will you? Will you?"

How could she deny him? She liked him well, and never so well as now. She could not bid him leave her, all uncomforted. She let him take her hands and kiss them, there in the evening calm of the great solemn woodlands; let him hold them and stroke them, as he muttered a few broken, halting words of love; and, hidden in the thicket, a man watched and maddened at the sight.

To no one of these came any foreknowledge of the future, any premonition of the things that should happen just there, where their feet trod the moss that sprang unhindered in the solitude from summer to peaceful summer.

Side by side at last the two passed through the gate, which closed behind them.

Cornara leaned against the trunk of a tree, and his chest laboured with the force of his passion. Twice he had been humiliated, treated like a dog in her presence, once by the elder Count, and once by the younger. All the evil in him surged boiling to the surface.

* * * * *

Next day, the Count and Cyprian both departed for the headquarters of the regiment. Cornara, who belonged to the Verderers' Corps, a fine body of men, most of them mountaineers, had orders dated some days later.

Alix left the castle on the day following the gentlemen's departure. Nothing had been said to Berilescu, either of Cyprian's secret betrothal—for so the young lover deemed it—or of Cornara's violent speech and behaviour.

Alix begged Cyprian not to be vindictive in the matter of the head forester; and, in view of the Count's preoccupation with weightier matters, and the man's

own imminent departure for the Front, Carolyi himself was of the opinion that nothing would be gained by telling tales. By the end of the war Cornara would have quieted down, and realised that Alix was not for him.

The Countess decided to remain at Vondo during her husband's absence, for two reasons. One of these was the proximity of the castle to the frontier, which would make it easier for her husband and brother to visit her if and when they obtained leave. The other was the fact that their flat in Bucharest was shut up, and that she could live more cheaply in the country.

As nothing was known of the meeting of the two young people in the forest, and as they succeeded pretty well, owing to the confusion of preparation for departure, in covering their consciousness of each other, Count Berilescu left with a comparatively easy mind; and the Countess spoke kindly of her hopes that Alix would be with her as much as possible during his absence. Floria, whose widower father was a general, would remain for the present to keep the lady company at Vondo.

Alix found herself once more back in her garret at the parsonage with a curious sense of unreality. The calm of her country life had indeed been abruptly broken, and the remembrance of all that had befallen her was troubling.

She blamed herself for yielding to Cyprian's plea for a secret understanding. She knew that, but for the risk of his never coming back, she would not have done so. Circumstances had been favourable to him that afternoon. He had come upon the scene as the champion of a distressed damsel, pursued by the unwelcome attentions of a villain; and his own method of wooing, showing up in strong contrast, had taken her unawares.

She did not love Cyprian. During tthe first stages of their acquaintance she had thought of him as what we

in England call a muff. But a feeling of fury surged up in her whenever she thought of the other man's outburst. Anything—anyone—who would make her safe from that!

She found her father puzzled and silent. He gazed upon her as upon a mystery. With anger in her heart she wondered whether Cornara had been bullying him. Also she unlocked her little store of money, to see how much she could do at once, before the forester's departure, to decrease her burden of debt.

She was vexed because she did not know its exact amount, and felt a difficulty about inquiring of either of the men concerned—of her father, because she was not supposed to know anything of the matter, and was loath to vex him—of Cornara, because she would have no further dealings with him.

On the other hand, she was anxious for the creditor to know that she was alive to the situation and meant to pay him. After some reflection she decided to make the few gold pieces which she could spare into a parcel, and to write a line to Cornara, saying that this was the first instalment of repayment; asking for a receipt in writing, and also documentary evidence of the whole amount.

It was a beautiful night, though moonless, and she determined to wait for nightfall, then walk to the forester's lodge, and leave the package with his housekeeper.

There was not much chance of meeting Cornara at that hour, for his profession obliged him to be out so much in daytime, and sometimes at night also, that when evening fell he was usually either in his own house, or far less frequently at the village hostel, or supping with a neighbour. The other inhabitants of Krilin were all early retirers, and she was not likely to be seen or recognised.

At supper she did her best to cheer her father, who gradually responded to her gaiety—somewhat forced that evening. She left him afterwards, seated contentedly with his pipe in the summer dusk.

The road she took was tree-shadowed almost all the way, and very dark. She walked circumspectly, for she was curiously afraid of encountering Cornara. There was the chance that he might be coming to the parsonage, bent upon making himself unpleasant; and if so, they must meet upon the road.

She met nobody, however, and reached the lodge quite unmolested. She could see no light, except such as showed through a glass pane above the house door. This seemed to indicate that Cornara was out. She did not go in by the front gate, but skirted the surrounding garden until she came to the back of the house, where she went in at the yard-gate. To her vexation, the kitchen regions also were dark, and the back door fastened. Evidently the housekeeper too was out, and she had made this disagreeable expedition in vain. She dared not knock or ring, in case the master of the house was within. She simply turned away and walked back to the yard gate.

Outside the night was inky black, and she hesitated a moment with a shrinking for which she could not account. Everything was perfectly quiet, however, and summoning her good sense she stepped out, closing the gate behind her. Instantly something thick and muffling fell over her head and body, she was lifted from her feet, and carried rapidly away.

The cry she uttered was stifled in the hot folds of the cloak which covered her, and she could not use her arms, which were held tightly to her sides. However, she disdained to struggle, and nobody was within hearing of any outcry she might make. Her captor, who was walking rapidly, seemed to swerve suddenly, then

to move forward more carefully; and presently she knew that he was carrying her upstairs.

VII

A MINUTE later she was set upon her feet. while she struggled to fling off her wrappings, she heard the drawing of bolts, the turning of a key.

As the cloak fell from her, rays of light met her eyes. She had been carried by Cornara into his house, and he stood facing her across a table, upon which stood a brightly-burning lamp.

She noted immediately that her prison was a small room, apparently used as an office, since it held a desk and many papers. It was lighted not by a window, but by a skylight. Then her gaze travelled to her captor's face, and its expression braced her.

He was very white, and beneath his eyes were purple marks which made them look enormous in the lamplight. His every sense seemed to be concentrated upon his observation of her, as though all depended upon her first words.

Curiously enough, this encouraged her. He was behaving atrociously, yet his whole attitude seemed to show that he, nevertheless, cared what she thought of him, that his anxiety to know how she took it almost equalled her anxiety to be gone.

"Marko Cornara, are you mad, or have you any kind of explanation to offer me?" said she gravely.

He folded his arms, for all the world like the villain in melodrama when he launches his thunderbolt.

"It is easily explained, Alix Delid. I asked you to marry me two days back, and you declined. But you must marry me, and time presses. I have therefore brought you into my house, and I intend to keep you here all night. My housekeeper is away, she will not

return until to-morrow. You will thus be compromised, and you will be obliged to allow your father to marry us in the morning."

His arrogant expression melted ludicrously in disappointment as he saw a smile curve the girl's mouth. She lifted her brows, as one does at a wholly unreasonable person.

"I could not have believed that a man of your age could act so childishly. Must I really point out what one would suppose you ought to see for yourself, that, so far from obliging me to marry you, your conduct only makes me vow that nothing in the world will induce me ever to speak to you again."

"But you will have to! Have to!" he shouted. "Can't you understand? You will be compromised! Your good name will be gone!"

She held up her hand.

"You need not shout. I can understand your shameful intention without your proclaiming it so loudly. Well! To lose my good name would be a misfortune, certainly; but nothing to compare with the misfortune of being married to you."

His anger was mounting.

"We are alone in this house, you and I. Hadn't you better take care?"

She flung back her head, giving him the full effect of her fine scorn.

"I echo your words, Marko Cornara. Hadn't *you* better take care?"

The effect was evident. He had made a step forward, but drew back, as from an unknown menace. As he glared at her, his eyes were full of something which shook the girl's heart, something she had never seen, did not know, but which moved her profoundly. For a moment she felt that she must burst into tears of pity for him; and suddenly the thought came to her that to

indulge this weakness might be the best policy she could follow.

"Oh, Marko!" she said gravely, lifting her hands and letting them fall again to her sides, "how could you? How could you disappoint me so?"

"Disappoint you?" He was taken aback.

"Yes. I thought—that day in the wood—that you really loved me!"

He flushed deeply.

"What then?"

She took out a handkerchief and dried her wet eyelashes.

"Why, this proves that you don't. When a man loves a woman, he doesn't treat her like this."

He made a sound of rage.

"You thought I loved you! That was why you let Carolyi kiss you, I suppose?"

"No! I let him kiss me because he was unhappy, and because he was going next day to the war."

"Would you have let me kiss you because I was unhappy, and was going to the war?"

"Ah, no! No!" she cried, in a gust of feeling she could not name. "That would have been quite different."

He quivered.

"I suppose so! A mere underling! A servant of your fine husband that is to be! No, by the Holy Eikon, he shall never have you! You shall marry me to-morrow, or leave Krilin an outcast."

"Neither the one nor the other. Don't be so stupid as to think you can bully me. Above all, don't be so stupid as to think you would care to have a woman on such terms."

He twisted his mouth and clenched his hands.

"You don't seem to realise that you are in my power."

"It is you who are mistaken. I am in no man's power, and never will be, without my own consent. Ah, why try to make yourself out a worse man than you are? You know quite well that this is all bluff, and that you wouldn't hurt a hair of my head."

"I won't hurt you," he muttered, looking aside, "but I'm going to keep you here."

She did not immediately reply. She was trying what the unspoken language of the eye can do. He had come round the table and stood close to her, his hands behind him. As she remained silent, he was obliged to turn his head and look at her; once held, he gazed into her eyes as if he would drown in them. The air pulsed with the unseen conflict of wills. Yet they both knew already who was victor in the combat.

"If you keep me, Marko, you sign your own death warrant," she said at last. "I think you know that I mean what I say; but if you need confirmation——"

Swiftly turning, she went to where the tiny light burned below the Eikon on the wall. Laying her hand upon the dim, old pictured saint, she said in a low tone:

"I make oath, so help me God and Saint Ostrov, that if Marko Cornara keeps me here to-night, I will never as long as I live speak another word to him in kindness, nor suffer him to come into my presence. Amen."

She fell upon her knees. For a couple of minutes she heard him pacing up and down the room. Then he came near—paused—bent his own knee at her side.

There was silence. They knelt close together, yet he dare not touch her. The lamplight shone through her ruffled glory of hair, for she had gone out in the dark without putting on a hat. He thought she wore a mystic aureole.

She rose calmly to her feet at last, resting her hand upon his shoulder to help her. Turning to his writing-

table, she took up the little package of money which she had laid down, and placed it upon his desk.

"Will you take me home now, Marko?" she asked wearily. "I am so tired."

He stood there, with who knows what thoughts racing through his hot head? He had been beaten by a girl—by Alix, the popa's daughter. In his untamed heart he was forced to own that she was stronger than he—that his bluff had failed—that he could never approach her against her will.

Later, as they walked home to the parsonage together, she told him that she had come to bring an instalment of their financial debt to him. He cried out, in a kind of agony, that she might have spared him that.

"If it hurts, you must feel inside you that you deserve to be hurt," she told him, with the kind of gravity with which a mother rebukes a babe for trying to steal sugar. "You have behaved in a way that I could not forgive, if it were not that you are just going to fight for your country. You must know that it galls my pride to feel that I owe you money. While you are away, I will try to save up the rest. Alas! I fear it will be difficult. Fiction won't be in much demand at Bucharest just now, will it?"

As he did not understand this allusion, she explained, and told him something of her own work and her delight in it; pointing out condescendingly, at the same time, how divided they were, he and she, in every taste and inclination.

"I could never make you happy," said she in her wisdom; and it was his turn to smile, as at a child's grave jest.

"What is the use of talking like that?" he asked. "There's only one woman in my world, and you are she. If you were to become the public executioner, I should still want you more than anything else. It's

an odd thing. I have behaved to you worse than ever in my life to a woman. All the time I was tied to that poor wretch they called my wife, I was patient with her after a fashion. At least I never bullied her. While you, for whom I'd spill my blood most freely—I have shown myself a ruffian to you, from the first; and it's as if I had died by my own hand."

After a slight pause she put a timid question; and he told her, in a kind of outburst, the whole story of his first marriage. They reached the parsonage gate long before it was done, and stood together in the gloom of the mossy avenue, she listening with eager pity to the avowal of a boy's weakness under temptation, and his long subsequent martyrdom. He confessed, too, that in mentioning to her the terms upon which he held his post he had broken his oath. She was able to assure him that Count Berilescu had not been told of his indiscretion, and would, she was pretty certain, never hear of it.

At last she dismissed him. It was their final farewell, for he would be leaving Krilin in another twenty-four hours. He tried to utter a few words of contrition, some slight expression of his shame. But his voice broke upon the words he would say, and he was brought to silence.

She offered him her hand, but he would not take it. Uncovering his head, he knelt upon the moss, and kissed the hem of her gown. Then, just for a moment, before rising from his knees, he leaned towards her as if he could not help it, and let his hot cheek touch the hand which hung at her side.

Immediately he was on his feet, had opened the gate and fled; while Alix, touching with her fingers the spot so caressed, felt that it was wet—wet with the wild man's tears.

VIII

FOR the first few weeks of the war, victory flowed through Rumania like a warm wind, lifting up the hearts of the people in ecstasy. The army was over the passes—the army was in the Maros Valley—the army was at Hermannstadt! They had flung an expedition over the Danube, they were advancing, as all felt certain that they would, to the redeeming of their own Transylvania.

Wiseacres had urged them to wait until the spring—but they had seen, as others had not, the demoralisation of Austria, and they were proving the wiseacres wrong. Joy was in every heart, triumph on every tongue. The domination of Germany, its insidious and hated influence, had been flung off by the patriotic King, and all Rumania rallied to his call.

. . . And then came the change. Germany, held off, baffled, thwarted on the West—driven back by Russia's huge armaments on the East—suddenly saw a chance began for another of the easy strokes upon which, since the war began, she had relied to keep her people fed with news of victory. Here was little Rumania making exhausted Austria look foolish. Why not scrape together every available unit, put them under a strong leader, and rush upon the small State before her Allies were ready to save her?

This would be a spectacular demonstration, something to hold the half-starved Central n ions off the throats of the tyrants who had led them .. their doom.

No sooner said than done. The Rumanian army, poorly provided with artillery, and fresh from a great effort already made, found the weak Austrian opposition exchanged for the German war machine, which was too strong for them.

Now the news altered. The enemy was advancing. Rumania retired, and changed her front. The enemy was sweeping on. He was at the Pass of Predeal, and for the first time the people of Krilin began to consider as a danger the proximity of their dwelling to the frontier.

Very soon after the declaration of war, the Countess had turned the castle of Vondo into a military hospital. Alix and Floria took a few weeks' training at Carmonaia, donned nurses' garb, and came back to minister to their wounded. These came in slowly at first, but presently they were arriving in masses, and only those unable to bear travel were left at Vondo, the rest being taken on further into the country.

As winter set in, day by day the wards grew fuller. By December the long drawing-room, the picture gallery, the dining-room, and the billiard-room were all full of beds, many of them on the floor for lack of bedsteads—a fact which added greatly to the burden of the nurses' task.

It was a still, dark night, though the early twilight had but just fallen, when a couple of horses galloped through the park, and their riders drew rein at the door. The elderly manservant, now hospital orderly, who admitted them, uttered a cry; for it was the young Count and his servant who waited without, and their faces showed that they bore no good news.

The old man's call soon brought the ladies. Cyprian's sister flung herself into his arms with a burst of tears. Floria caught both his hands, and her eyes glowed with pleasure. Alix herself was not unmoved, though she could not return the glowing glance he flung to her.

This man, to whom war was a thing abhorrent, had been doing his best under circumstances of hardship. It was unfortunate that his uniform seemed to

emphasize the defects of his build, his long neck and narrow chest.

At first, the delight of meeting eclipsed all else; and the new arrivals were desperately hungry. But before he tasted the supper he so sorely needed, Cyprian began to speak of his errand; and all joy was over.

The General had given him special leave to ride to Vondo, hell for leather, and take the three ladies to a place of safety. The Germans were but a few hours behind him.

"I am to put you into the car and take you to Carmonaia, and thence we must go on to Bucharest, or even Jassy, if they cannot be stopped before they get to Bucharest," he said.

And at those words his sister shrieked aloud:

"To Bucharest! My Heaven, Cyprian! Is it possible? The Germans in Bucharest! That means the fall of Rumania?"

"Courage, Myra; it means nothing of the kind. They may get there, but they will not be able to stay there. Have no fears of the end. Meanwhile, they are coming here, and that without doubt; and you must not stay to meet them. They are Germans; they own no laws of God or man. No hospital is sacred to them, no woman safe from their brutality. They will murder at the altar's foot, they insult and defile wherever their foul feet tread. You must be away before they arrive."

The Countess looked around her in despair.

"But, Cyprian, surely Leo must have forgotten that we have this hospital! How can we leave? We are understaffed as it is; we have sixty cases on our hands, besides convalescents. We cannot possibly forsake our posts!"

"Thank Heaven, ma'am, you have said it!" cried 'Alix warmly. "I knew you would feel so. We cannot go, of course."

Cyprian started at the sound of her enthusiasm.

"But you have no choice, Alix Delid," said he quickly. "You must go. The Count sends his orders."

"The Count does not know how we are circumstanced," replied Alix at once. "But, even if his orders are strict, they cannot apply to me. I am the popa's daughter, and my place is here. Madame, if you doubt, do as your husband wishes," she went on, going to where the Countess stood torn with indecision. "I will stay here, and do my best in your absence."

"No, Alix!" cried Cyprian desperately. "That I forbid! Even my sister runs less risk than young girls like you and Floria! You must come! I insist upon it! I must snatch a morsel of food, but in a quarter of an hour I shall expect you all to be ready."

With that he went out to order the car, and the three turned and looked upon each other. The Countess was half distracted in her anxiety to do right. She felt responsible for the two beautiful young creatures who stood before her. This she knew was no generous foe, but a nation who had given themselves to the service of the devil, men who stopped short at nothing, without honour, without pity.

There were stores of petrol in the garage, and the car was all ready for the road. They had been using it almost daily for the carrying to and fro of patients, and the Government had sent them large supplies of fuel. Safety lay before them if they could reach Carmonaia, a three hours' journey in a fast car.

On the other hand, here lay their duty and their responsibility; all these helpless creatures at their mercy. The Countess recalled a true story of German soldiers throwing quantities of straw into a church full of wounded and then setting it on fire. It all ran through her mind as she stood there irresolute.

Alix was thinking on the same lines. She determined

that, as soon as she had persuaded the Countess to go, she would see that the petrol was well hidden.

She spoke to the weeping lady earnestly, pointing out to her that Floria was in her charge, and it was her duty to protect her. For her, Alix, all was different. Her duty, as the Countess must see, was at Krilin. By the time Cyprian, having prepared the car, rushed back into the room where he had left her, she had persuaded them to go upstairs and make ready for the journey.

When he entered, Alix was removing the supper things, with the help of one of the assistant girls. His impulse was to catch her in his arms and hold her until he had forced consent from her. The presence of the other girl restrained him.

"For pity's sake, Alix," he cried, "you must know that I cannot go and leave you here, a prey to the vilest soldiery in the world!"

"And you must know," she answered gently, "that I cannot leave my helpless sick here, a prey to the vilest soldiery in the world. No, no."—as he strode up to her and snatched her hands—"you cannot compel me. I had rather die to-night than live dishonoured, as I should be if I fled to safety and abandoned my post here!"

As she spoke, unseen by her, the two ladies had entered the room. Floria uttered a cry, and unfastened her fur robe, flinging it from her.

"Right, Alix! I have felt it all along! Dear Myra, if you go, you go without us. We stay by our men."

The Countess threw up her hands.

"What will Leo say?"

"I know what he would say if he were here," said Alix boldly. "He would say, better the line of Berilescu should perish than that the last Berilescu should forsake his post."

There was a throbbing silence. Cyprian's eyes dwelt on Alix, half in admiration, half in exasperation.

"You don't know what you are talking about!" he cried; and, even as he spoke, a boy from the village, whose business it was to scout and report, came rushing into the room with scared face and wild eyes.

"They are coming!" he cried. "They are close to Krilin! A small body, perhaps fifty perhaps a hundred, but they have two machine guns."

"Then it is too late now," said the Countess faintly.

"Where are they?" demanded Cyprian of the boy. Alix noted that his face had blanched and his voice shook.

"They did not come over the pass, but over the Little Nun's Way," replied the boy. "Someone must have betrayed it to them, for nobody, unless he were shown, could know it for a road that would bring them down in half the time."

"It is the advance guard," said Cyprian, looking about him in a confused way. "Well, there is no defence possible. We can but await them."

"There are two things we might do," said Alix. "We might hide the petrol in the crypt under the chapel—the secret crypt; and we might send your chauffeur to Carmonaia with our three most important cases in the car, telling him to let the authorities know that the Germans have forced the pass, and that we are defenceless."

"She is right," said Carolyi, starting from his stupor. "There are General Jacobi and General Lyoli, as well as the young Prince Odescu. It would be a triumph for those brutes to take them prisoners, but we'll prevent that."

"And send Floria with them," whispered Alix, as she passed him on her way to go and make ready her patients. "She is your sister's chief cause of anxiety.

If you tell her someone *must* go with the patients to look after them, she will do it willingly; and she has friends in Carmonaia."

"You think of everything," said Cyprian gratefully.

And, as a matter of fact, Floria yielded gracefully, for she saw that each moment was valuable, and she alone, of all the nurses, had made preparations for the journey.

Alix soon had the three officers wrapped in blankets and carried downstairs and out by the back way by those of the patients who were convalescent. In twenty minutes they were off, and all available hands had been commandeered to hide the petrol and a quantity of stores. They left out a few petrol tins and just as much of the stores as they hoped would avert suspicion and keep the invaders from hunting for more.

They had just completed this work, and Alix had hastened upstairs to wash her hands and put on a clean white dress before returning to her patients, when sounds of disturbance and excitement struck upon her ears. There was the confused noise of trampling horses and shouting in the courtyard, and she felt that her hour was upon her. Her womanhood must be exposed to the gaze of hostile eyes; she must take orders from men whose very presence was to her an insult; must witness and hear things that would curdle her blood, such things as a few years back the whole world would have deemed malicious inventions in connection with a great nation at war.

She did not wait an instant, for the sick might need soothing and reassurance. She ran down the corridor to the door of the gallery, where was the largest ward. Someone came dashing up the great staircase, three steps at a time, saw her, uttered a muffled cry, and hastened to where she stood. It was Cornara.

She noticed, in some surprise, that he wore the uni-

form of an officer, and even in that tense moment she was struck by the splendid appearance he made. Cyprian followed him, his face expressive of untold relief; but Cyprian was nowhere beside the magnificent captain of verderers.

"Alix, that fool of a boy didn't know enough to recognise our own troops when he saw them!" cried the young Count eagerly. "It is Cornara, as you see, and he has cut across the Little Nun's Way with a company of picked men to try to gain time, so that we can transfer the wounded and the women before the Germans get here."

Alix lifted a transfigured face to the head forester.

"Well done!" she said.

The blood rushed to his dark face as his eyes seemed to snatch at her bright gaze and feed upon the sight of her beauty. She held out both hands, and he took them in his own, big, warm, and hard. He was more moved than she; she could feel that he was shaking. He began instantly to speak, as if to choke down his emotion.

"The advance guard of the Germans have reached the road at a point rather more than five miles off," said he. "At that point they caught a spy, purposely left there for them to take. He has his orders, which are to persuade them to strike off through the forest, and he will lead them to the gate in the wall, through which they can enter and surprise the castle, which is represented as unconscious of its danger and completely without garrison. I have two machine guns with me, and my men are piling up rocks from the rock garden to raise them. We can do a prodigious execution when we get the attackers there under the wall, wedged in by the trees so that only a few can come on at a time. Of course we can't drive them off, but we can gain time

—several hours, if God wills—and there are two big motor lorries in the yard for the sick."

"Cornara," said Cyprian, "are you sure that this is wise? Will it not exasperate the enemy needlessly? When they get through, what will happen to those they find?"

Cornara laughed.

"The same thing, sir, that has already happened to a great number of our fellow-countrymen," he replied, "the difference being that hundreds of those who have fallen have died without being able to pay for their own death in advance, as we mean to do to-night, please God."

"But the women?" said Cyprian uneasily.

"Your sister shall go with the first consignment, sir. Alix Delid with——"

"With the last," cut in the girl quickly. "I am in charge here; I cannot go until my wards are empty."

"Then we must hold them off until you are ready," he replied, his eyes fixed upon that smile.

He looked at Cyprian then, a deliberate gaze which seemed to search and appraise the man who was to be the husband of this idolised woman.

"I think you can trust me, sir, to see that, whatever happens, Alix Delid takes no harm," said he.

Stepping forward, Carolyi held out his hand.

"You are a good fellow, Cornara; you know how to lose," said he. "Count me as a lieutenant under your command, if you please."

IX

THE three separated as may those who know that in human probability they will not meet again. Yet so urgent was the situation and so short the time that there was no leave-taking.

Cornara's first preoccupation was to get his machine guns mounted and his men fed. He pressed into the service a dozen wounded who were convalescent, wrapped them in fur robes, and set them to dig a trench with a bank in front a little way within the postern gate.

He was fully sensible that his resistance was but a forlorn hope. Nevertheless, there were things in his favour. A moat, now dry, had formerly run all round the castle, under the wall. It had been filled in with a narrow causeway just where the path led from the forest to the gate, but on either hand it fell away, adding nine or ten feet to the height of the wall and increasing the difficulty of scaling.

By the Count's orders it had always been kept clear of trees, while those which grew upon its outer verge were large and strong, giants of the forest. They left no space in which the attackers might deploy, and were so large that to cut them down would be a long business, to say nothing of the danger they would create as they fell among men tightly packed.

One of the motor lorries he had commandeered was full of ammunition, and this was unloaded as rapidly as possible and carried to the spot before any other operations were begun.

Meanwhile, Alix superintended the removal of the wounded. With a generosity which Carolyi recognised, Cornara appointed him to see that this was duly effected.

It was a long business, although conducted with the utmost possible expedition. The Countess Berilescu left with the first consignment. When the second was loaded up it was found that a dozen or so of cases, mostly dying men, must be left behind. By this time Cyprian had seen that Alix was inflexible, and he did not importune her to go in the second lorry. Yet he knew she was risking her life.

As the unwieldy vehicle, heavily laden, rolled away out of the courtyard and took the Carmonaia road, the first sputter of firing was heard across the park. The spy had succeeded; he had lured the enemy to the gate in the wall, and they were encountering a warm reception.

Carolyi, catching up his sword, hastened to the scene of action. Alix was too busy with the duties which crowded upon her to be able to realise the tension of her own nerves.

The large wards had all been cleared. The cases that remained were put in a bed-chamber on the first floor, at the end of a corridor. In his rapid survey of the place Cornara had ordered that this should be so, not only because he thought the enemy might not at once penetrate so far, seeing the other wards empty, but also because the room was accessible by a winding stair in the wall from the garden without, so that he might in case of necessity reach it without going through the house.

In this room Alix and her father remained, moving from bed to bed, giving what cheer they might to those who lay there. By an unlucky chance their sole resident doctor had gone out that afternoon, just before Carolyi's arrival, to help a poor woman suddenly taken ill in the village, and had been unable to return.

There was but little to do for those who remained. A dying lad, getting a grip of Alix's hand, would not let it go. He was wandering in his mind, murmuring of his home and of the sea. Alix, feeling for the first time her physical exhaustion, knelt down by the bed, patiently soothing him. There was nothing now but to wait.

Humanly speaking, there was no escape. The lorries would not be able to return, for by the time they were at Carmonaia the main body of the invading troops would be flooding down the road. But a great peace

filled the girl's soul, for she had saved Floria and the Countess, and she had saved all those of her wounded who had a chance of life.

Presently her father spoke to her, saying he was going down by the garden way to see if he could obtain news of the fighting. There were continual sounds of firing, shouts of fury, and an indeterminate uproar which kept the nerves at strain. Upon this background of the furious raging together of men, the big clock ticked solemnly. All was quiet in the ward. Alix's head sank upon the pillow of the bed by which she knelt, and for a while she slept.

. . . . . .

She was awakened by the abrupt opening of a door, and the precipitate entrance of someone. Starting into conciousness, she stumbled to her feet, cramped with the odd attitude in which she had fallen asleep.

Carolyi stood before her, and his aspect was alarming. Blood was trickling from his cheek, his face was white as chalk, his lips quivered. Evidently he was in an acute state of nervous tension.

He could hardly articulate.

"Almost—over. They must be through—in a few minutes. They will be here. Oh, merciful Heaven, what an awful thing is war!"

"You are hurt," said Alix, with a quiet confidence which soothed his panic. "Come and sit by the fire; I will wash your wound and give you some hot coffee. Yes, it is awful, but it is stimulating, too. We have our backs to the wall, and we are not going to disgrace our blood. Courage, comrade!"

He sat as if under a spell while she deftly bathed the long, jagged graze where a bullet had whistled past, narrowly missing killing him.

By the time she had completed her ministrations he

had pulled himself together, and looked at her in sudden shame or compunction.

"I—I was forgetting!" he stammered. "I came to fetch you, not to let you waste your time over me. It's all over, as I told you. But by some miracle the car—our own car which took Floria and the Generals—has got back. Floria sent him pelting back as soon as they reached the hospital. You must come with me; there is just time, but only just. Come, don't delay. This is a matter which admits of no argument. Your work here is done; there is nothing to wait for. Meanwhile, my whole future happiness rests with you, and I claim you. You must go with me. Alix, for pity's sake, don't look like that, don't draw back. Even you must be satisfied now; even you must realise that the moment for flight has come."

Alix, who had stood, perforce, listening to this appeal, now stooped, lifted the basin of bloody water, and carried it away to a side table where a sink had been improvised. As she busied herself in cleansing it she spoke, her head bent over her work, her voice carefully steadied that he might not hear the disappointment in it.

"I am not leaving, Count Carolyi," said she. "You need not try to urge it. You, however, are heir to a large property. There is just time for you to save your own—valuable—life."

He stood a moment puzzled, then the red flooded his fair face.

"That means you think me a coward?"

She was drying her hands carefully upon a towel.

"I am no man's judge; I can decide for myself only. My duty is here, with the sick and with my father."

"He can come with us."

With a little smile she shook her head.

"You could not persuade him, any more than you

can me. Our sick are here, and, if God is merciful, we may be able to protect them."

"You cannot protect them."

"In France the English came back to a barn where, in a sudden surprise, they had been forced to leave some wounded men. They found a row of corpses—stark naked and with their throats cut. Do you think that even Germans would have dared to do that if a woman had been there to remind them that they were men?"

He did not attempt argument.

"Alix, once more I implore you—in fact, I command you to come with me!"

"Once for all, I will not go with you, Count Carolyi. Farewell, and take my thanks for all you have done for us."

She walked away from him down the whole length of the room, to bend over a bed where the last mutterings of a dying man were ceasing gradually.

Cyprian gazed after her in dumb despair. He was at the end of his resources. It would never enter his mind to pick her up, as Cornara would have done, and save her in spite of herself. The shattered nerves which had driven him out of the battle reasserted themselves, and he was seized with a fit of trembling. Rather with a view to hide his weakness than because he had decided to make his escape and abandon her, he turned and almost groped his way out of the room, which he foresaw as the scene of some horrible carnage.

X

ALIX bent above her patient, and saw that his breath had stopped. Crossing his hands upon his chest, she knelt a moment at his side, then rose and covered the face of the dead. She wasted no thought upon Cyprian; all her being was centred upon the fight about the gate,

The volume of sound was drawing nearer now. As she moved between the beds, giving drinks to one and another, she could hear the tumult approaching. Apparently, Cornara's men were disputing every inch of the way. Then it seemed as if the firing dropped, the howls died down. The wave of invaders was through, the tramp of feet was audible close to the castle wall.

As she stood in the centre of the floor, listening intently, she heard the door at the stairfoot open and close again. Footsteps ran lightly up, and Cornara came eagerly into the room. As his eye fell on her he started, and a look of some deep vexation crossed his face.

"Where's Carolyi? Did he not reach you?"

"He did."

"And why are you not with him?"

"Because my place is here."

His look was half pride, half agony.

"Ah, but it was a chance, the best chance for your safety!" he cried.

"What, did you send him?" she cried impulsively. "He never told me that."

"What do you mean? Would it have made a difference if he had?"

"If you had thought it right for me to go," she said, very low, "I think I would have done as you told me."

Those words turned him white.

"It isn't too late!" he gasped. "Let me only get you out of this room unseen, and we ought to do it. My men have gone round to hold the entrances to the stableyard. I can get you out at the back—if you will come with me."

"My father?" she faltered. "I don't know where he is. He went outside; he is probably ministering to the dying! Oh, Marko, how can I go and leave him here?"

He made a gesture of despair.

"What did I do this for," he cried, "spending the lives of my best men like water, but to save you?"

At the words her whole face kindled.

"And you shall save me! Only keep a pistol-shot for me! I have a revolver here on this table, but I might not get a chance to use it. Stay by me and I shall be safe!"

"But there is Carolyi, the man you love. He has behaved so finely—he, who hates a scrap as a cat loathes water. He, too, rode far and fast to save your life. What will he think of me, who have brought you to the pass at which a pistol-shot may be the only possible kindness? Ah, by St. Ostrov, here he is!"

Carolyi rushed precipitately in. His face was ghastly.

"They are coming," he gasped, "searching the house, and they are mad with rage at the trick played upon them. It will be worse, far worse, Cornara, than if you had surrendered the castle quietly."

"Oh," cried Alix indignantly, "how can you say so, when the Countess, Floria, and most of the wounded are safe? What does it matter about Marko and me?"

Marko, hearing his name thus uttered, groaned audibly. His senses were all stretched to their fullest capacity, listening, waiting. For there was a chance yet, a chance he had not mentioned, because it might so easily go wrong. He had made arrangements, before leaving the battle at the pass, with a lieutenant whom he could trust, to bring a second expedition across by the Little Nun's Way, and reach Vondo in time to fall upon the rear of the attacking force. They had agreed that the signal of arrival should be the winding of a horn, such as the Carpathian foresters use, as soon as the relief should reach the castle wall. He had hoped against hope to hear that sound before his defence finally crumbled. If he did not hear it within the next

quarter of an hour, it would mean that the lieutenant had been unable to get away.

Should he risk smuggling Alix down by the secret stair? With the enemy below, he thought the danger too great, too certain. The tramp of armed feet already advanced along the corridor. With a gesture for silence to the other two, he stooped behind the tall screen which sheltered the occupant of the furthest bed from the draught of the secret door.

Carolyi was standing at the opposite end of the room, facing the door by which the Germans would enter. Alix, midway between the two, was arranging some appliances at a little table whereon lay her revolver, hidden beneath a roll of lint.

The door was flung open and a large, gross-looking officer, followed by two subalterns and a couple of privates, stood in the doorway.

"Right!" said he triumphantly. "I have tracked the rats to their burrow. Hands up!" sharply to Cyprian, who obeyed automatically. "The Count Berilescu, I presume?"

"I am not Count Berilescu. He is in command of a division," said Cyprian, speaking with dignity, though his voice shook a little.

"This, however, is, I presume, the Countess?" with a horrible leer at Alix.

"The Countess is not in the castle. I am the nurse in charge," said Alix quietly.

"The nurse in charge? Good! You shall take charge of me, while my men look after your friend. I am very tired, and long for a nice supper and a comfortable bed. You shall go with me and choose my quarters."

The major was in an ugly mood. The march stolen upon him, the evacuation of the hospital, and the heavy losses he had sustained made him savage. Per-

haps it also made him reckless. The delight of insulting a lady, under the eyes of a young man who was probably either her lover or her husband, filled his mind and blinded him to caution. He had apparently but one man to deal with, and him the soldiers had already disarmed. With a malicious grin he drew nearer to Alix, who did not move, but watched his approach with outward calm.

"There are plenty of servants to show you quarters for the night," said she. "My place is here, and I cannot leave it."

Her hand, as she spoke, closed firmly on the hidden revolver.

Even at this crisis of their fortune, Cyprian was struck by her fluent, idiomatic German far better than his own.

"My little sugar-lamb," said the major, with a sudden gleam in his fishy eye, "this is a matter for my decision, not yours."

Carolyi, in an agony, said quickly to her in Rumanian:

"Do not irritate him; go with him, as he asks; call some of the servants."

As he was speaking a sound startled them all. It was only the quiet opening of the little door at the far end of the room. Through it came Gregor Delid, wearing his priestly vestments, and carrying the sacred vessels in his hands. He came from his ministry to the dying, and his beautiful face wore the exaltation of his office. On his shoulders his deely golden hair lay in waves; his eyes, dark blue, like his daughter's, were alight with fervour; and for an acute moment the Germans who beheld him thought they saw a vision of the Christ.

Coming majestically forward, he laid down what he carried, and, turning, faced the enemy. Raising his

right hand, he spoke in slow but intelligible German, his finger indicating the major:

"Thus saith the Lord! 'Thou fool! This night shall thy soul be required of thee!'"

The German shook off his momentary attack of superstition with a cry of rage.

"Seize him! Carry him to the men! Have him tied up and flogged!" he shouted hoarsely.

The two subalterns ran forward. Neither had his revolver out, for it was a question of taking an unarmed man. At the moment, Cornara, revolver levelled, stepped from behind the screen. "Halt! If anyone lays a finger on the priest or the lady, I shoot the major."

"And put up your hands, or I shoot also!" cried Alix, darting to her father's side, her own weapon ready.

The major shook with fury.

"Go, Zimmermann, summon a squad of men," he cried; and the soldier who was nearest the door ran out of the room.

As he went, there came to them all, high and clear, the note of a horn, winding a curious wild call, well known to the Rumanian mountaineer. Cornara laughed. For a moment he had the situation in his hands.

"Put up your hands!" he mocked. "You are all dead men. My reinforcements are crossing the park at this moment!"

"Lying pig-dog!" shrieked the major, as he himself dashed at Alix, flung up her guard with ease, and caught her by the waist, wrenching her arm to make her drop her weapon.

He had barely touched her when Cornara's revolver spoke, and the brute screamed, a high, thin scream, let the girl go, reeled half round, and fell sideways to the floor with a heavy thud.

"Thou fool," sounded the chanting voice of Gregor. "This night—this night—accursed, thou wast warned!"

The two subalterns had, at the same instant as the major made his spring, rushed upon Cornara. As he would not risk the steadiness of his aim, they succeeded in closing with him at the cost only of a wounded arm to one of them. He grappled with his assailants, shouting to Carolyi to come to his assistance; but Carolyi had finally lost his head. He ran to Alix, dragged her a little way. "Come," he babbled, "there will be murder done —murder, and worse! You shall not stay to see it."

Alix resisted with all her force. She had seen what Cornara, occupied in his struggle, failed to notice—that the dying major had raised himself upon one arm and succeeded in drawing his revolver. Even as Alix wrenched herself free and ran towards the wrestling group, he fired at Cornara, who staggered and fell to his knees, his head covered with blood.

His two assailants flung him to the ground and made a dash at Alix; but she had taken refuge behind her father, who stood before her with lifted arm. She staggered a few steps, dropped upon her knees beside the dead forester, and, slipping her hands under his shoulders, lifted his shattered head upon her lap.

In the doorway stood a breathless German, crying wildly for the major. "Where is he? We are surprised, we are trapped!"

One of the subalterns dashed out of the room, and the other, with the assistance of the soldier who remained, secured Carolyi and dragged him away.

Alix heeded nothing of what passed. She crouched there, gazing intently upon the rigidity of the dark, proud face, the unquenched stare of the hawk eyes. Then, with a moan, she drew the end of her apron over the piteous sight, hiding her dead from view.

She was not conscious of any sense of loss nor of any sorrow, merely a paralysis of all feeling.

She heard, without hearing, the rush of many feet

without, hoarse yells and wild struggles, shots and curses from the rooms below. What did anything matter?

She was safe, it seemed, saved by the devotion and forethought of the man who lay dead in her arms.

After some while—minutes, hours, days, she knew not which—her father gently laid a hand upon her shoulder.

"Give me some water, warm, in a basin," she whispered, "and some lint from the table there. I must—I have got to wash him clean."

Gregor collected the things she asked for, placing them beside her on the floor. She made no effort, however, to use them. Sick shudderings passed over her from time to time. She had forgotten her intention of a minute ago.

Within a few paces the German writhed in his death agony. Gregor knelt beside him, and inquired stumblingly if he could help him or write any last message.

"Where are my men? Why do they leave me—here?" muttered the failing wretch.

"They are all prisoners, or dead. Our reinforcements hold the castle," replied Gregor. "I warned thee—I said: 'Thou fool!' and thou wouldest not hearken. Neither doth thy nation hearken to God's voice. And all shall sink to a like doom."

Then, urgently, he began to entreat the German to make his peace with God. The broken utterances fell upon the ear of Alix, but conveyed no meaning. She had passed into one of those states of mental lethargy in which capacity for suffering ceases for a while.

Again she heard the clock tick as it had ticked earlier in the night. A sick man in one of the beds cried out, but she took no heed. Years seemed to be rolling by over her head. She had grown old. And she wondered why all this should be, for the man whose mutilated

head lay in her lap was nothing to her—nothing!

Shouts, cries of triumph, echoed along the gallery without. The door opened; Cyprian rushed in, flushed and elated with victory.

"It's done! We have them all!" he cried. "And, Alix my darling, you are safe. Come, poor love, I must take you away at once, out of these shambles. Ah, you know, you know I would have spared you. I tried to spare you, and you would not listen."

His last words seemed to touch a spring and awaken her dormant intelligence. She uttered a cry. "Oh, that is true—that is true! Why do you remind me of it? If I had not insisted upon staying, he would not be lying here dead! The reinforecments would have been in time. It is I who have killed him!"

"Heavens, my dearest, what are you saying?" cried Cyprian, appalled by the sudden violence of emotion she displayed. "Be a brave girl, and come away. You must forget all this horror. Remember, Cornara was a brave man. He has died as he would have wished to die, fighting for his country, and by his death he has blotted out anything that was against him. More than that, he did not die until he knew that his plan was successful, until he had heard the arrival of his men."

She made no answer at all; it is doubtful if she heard.

"Come, dear one, let me raise you from the ground."

Motioning him away with her hand, she bent down, peeling her apron back from the dead face as carefully as a nurse may lift the covering from a sleeping babe.

"Look," she whispered, "how his blood has flowed, how it has sunk into my clothes! How it has——"

Suddenly she ceased to speak, and remained silent, gazing upon Cornara. Then she gave a cry which startled Carolyi horribly. He thought the night of horror had unsettled her reason.

"It's flowing still!" she cried, with incredulous joy.

"Look! Look! Do you see? It's flowing still!"

"Yes, dear, I see. Now come away."

"You see, but you don't understand? Blood doesn't flow from a corpse! He's alive! *He's alive!* Call some of the men. Help me to get him on a bed. Send two wardmaids; find the doctor. Ah, help me, help me, before it is too late!"

The main body of the German army corps flowed over the pass and through Krilin, but it left Vondo severely alone. Half a battalion had been ambushed and annihilated there, the victorious forces having got away safely and joined their fellows farther on.

There came a day when Marko's dark eyes opened upon the world in full consciousness once more.

Everything about him was sweet and fresh. He lay in a small room, the fire burned comfortably, and red azaleas from the Vondo hothouses bloomed here and there.

The maiden who sat sewing beside him flashed a glance at his open eyes, rose, and slipped out of the room without a word.

A very few minutes, and someone else entered, someone who had apparently been roused from bed, for her cheeks were warmly blooming, and her hair flowed in its loose mass all about her shoulders.

"You know me?" she whispered.

He felt shy, and smiled with lowered eyes.

Bending down, she laid her lips upon his forehead, just below the slanting edge of his bandages.

The colour surged up furiously into his pale face. He essayed a question, short enough, but it showed how clear his mind was.

"Where's Carolyi?"

She laid down her head upon the pillow beside his, and her mouth was very near his own.

"He has gone to his own people," she answered, low, "and I—I am staying here—with mine."

V

THE HAUNTED WELL

I

DUSK, the early dusk of late November, was closing in over the frost-bound earth. It was the autumn of the dark war year, 1915. The owner of Lutteridge Hall and his guest, Captain Mornoch, tramped side by side up the drive towards the old Tudor doorway, giving on the big hall.

Commander Devenish—or, as he was usually now called, the Squire—had retired from the Navy when his wife's death, following swiftly on that of his elder brother, had left him owner of a family estate and half a dozen motherless children. He quitted his profession with regret, for he was a true son of Devon, descendant of the old merchant adventurers. Nevertheless, he speedily settled down to the agreeable life of a country landowner, and knew no discontent until his country went to war, and he found himself longing for the quarterdeck once more.

He sent up his request to the Admiralty, but there was no command for him at that time. He was bidden to wait, and he had waited more than a year.

In the October of 1915 he received a letter from Sir John Mornoch, a friend of long standing, but from whom, as he lived in Scotland, the Squire seldom heard. Next day he announced to the family that he expected a

visitor upon a long and indefinite stay—Captain Mornoch, youngest brother of Sir John.

The guest, when he arrived, proved to be a tall, black-haired, taciturn man, fifteen years younger than his host, but seeming far more his contemporary than that of the young folks.

The eldest of the Squire's family, Sacharissa, was just grown to very pretty womanhood. Her mother's early death had bred in her a certain precocity. There were, besides, four boys and girls, of whom the youngest was eleven years old; and the circle was completed by a girl of Sacharissa's own age, a cousin, Deirdre Nugent, the doubly orphaned daughter of the Squire's only sister. This sister had married one Phelim Nugent, an Irishman. Deirdre was a wild, impetuous girl, and it was with some hesitation that the Squire had adopted her into the family.

Sacharissa understood to perfection the art of playing hostess to guests. She ruled the household with remarkable ability. But it was to Deirdre, the romp, that the boys brought cut fingers and torn garments; Deirdre who sympathized; Deirdre who played with them.

This November evening, as the host and his guest were approaching the house after their cold walk, the huge wood fire on the hall hearth was lighting up the eager faces of a huddle of children curled up around their cousin on the great bearskin rug, listening to a ghost story.

There was no other light save the glow that just illumined the breathless group and left the rest of the big hall in somewhat awesome gloom. But from the drawing-room there fell upon the snow without three long shafts of light, showing where Sacharissa sat, entertaining Larrie Lenox, a near neighbour and frequent visitor.

Mornoch and his host entered the hall without noise. Hearing the sound of a voice in narration, they took their seats unseen among the shadows.

Deirdre was repeating the celebrated Lutteridge ghost story—not for the benefit of the family, who had heard it a dozen times, but for that of a schoolfellow spending a few days of his holidays with Hugh and Charles.

Lutteridge Hall is mostly of Tudor origin, but some of it is earlier still. The oldest part is nothing but stables now, surrounding a somewhat ruinous courtyard which is little used. In the centre of this courtyard is a well unusually large in circumference, and fitted with a huge windlass, from which hangs a deep strong bucket in which one can stand up to the hips. It is possible, though not easy, to descend in the bucket until, some feet above water-level, one reaches a narrow door in the well side. This door communicates with a stone passage, leading to a stair which winds its ascent up into the very bowels of the house, where it terminates in a tiny chamber to which there is no other method of access save by the well.

According to the story, a certain Devenish, in feudal days, having made a prisoner of his enemy, bestowed him in the chamber of the Haunted Well. Being suddenly called away upon urgent affairs, he forgot, in the hurry of the moment, to leave any instructions respecting the feeding of his unfortunate victim. Circumstances inexorably prevented his return, and he could not send a message. When at last he reached home —they say he rode a horse to death in his haste—he found his prisoner dead. In the pangs of starvation the wretched man had gnawed the wood of the table.

Deirdre missed no point in her recital of these horrors. Her lovely voice—the Irish voice with tears in it—vibrated through the warm hush that sur-

rounded her. The children hung spellbound upon her words.

Suddenly the sound of voices was heard, and a door opening from the drawing-room let in a stream of light and framed the figures of Sacharissa and her devoted Larrie Lenox.

"Is anybody here? Why are you all in the dark?" cried Miss Devenish, applying her white hand to the electric switches.

The hall sprang into view from end to end, revealing the tangle of children upon the rug, with Deirdre in their midst, and also the silent figures of the Squire and Captain Mornoch.

"Really, Deirdre!" laughed Sacharissa, sweeping in and gazing down at the rough-and-tumble scene, thence apologetically to the grave and critical listener. "My cousin loves to tell bogey stories. Then the boys are afraid to go upstairs to bed," said she, with an accent of affectionate contempt.

Deirdre rose to her feet, shaking out her frock, and flashed a look of defiance under her brows at Captain Mornoch. Ever since he had come to the house he seemed to be constantly taking her at a disadvantage. She did not realise that she felt this only because she had never previously cared what anybody thought of her. She had at present no idea that Mornoch's good opinion affected her at all.

"Don't you believe in ghosts, Miss Devenish, then?" asked Mornoch, his hands behind him, gazing down at the dainty Sacharissa.

She poised her foot upon the fender and laughed up at him.

"I have been taught better than that," said she demurely.

"Then you are like the old lady who didn't believe

in ghosts, but was afraid of them," flashed Deirdre, unable to resist.

The boys chorused.

"Afraid to go to bed indeed! We know who is! Why, Saska wouldn't walk alone round the Haunted Well after dark for any wager; would you, Saska?"

"Oh, Hugh, what nonsense you talk!" said his sister with beautiful patience.

"Deirdre would, though. Deirdre has. Deirdre walked around the battlements on the tower keep!" shouted Deirdre's admirers.

"She says," confided little Mary, slipping her hand into Mornoch's "that nobody can help feeling afraid, but that being brave is going on as if you weren't afraid when really you are."

"Hear, hear," said Mornoch heartily. "That's the root of the matter. May——" But more could not be said, for Sacharissa was directing the redistribution of the party as the servants carried in tea.

This redistribution brought Captain Mornoch to Sacharissa's side, and relegated Lenox to the outer circle of the group round the tea-table. Larrie was a standing dish, and Miss Devenish was certain of being able to whistle him back whenever she wanted him. Captain Mornoch was not only a stranger; there was something of mystery hanging about him. He had never been to Lutteridge before, and why had he come now? Her father's slight confusion of manner when announcing his visit had suggested to Miss Devenish that the dark, impressive man with the curious long green eyes was in search of a bride.

"Well," said he, as he took his seat beside her and handed hot cake, "where do you think your father and I have been this afternoon? I was so interested with what you told me of Mr. Frederick Berger and all he has done for the Luttermouth trade that we got him

to let us see over his harbour works. It was most interesting."

"Oh, why did you not take me?" cried the girl, pouting. "I should have enjoyed it above all things. Did you see the beautiful Elma?"

"Yes. We were introduced to Mrs. and Miss Berger, and to the young man—Stan I think they call him; I suppose his name is Stanley?"

"No, it is Stanislaus, but he hates it because he thinks it sounds German. He is trying for a commission, you know, but finds it hard to get, because Mr. Berger was only naturalised two months before war was declared. Such nonsense, isn't it? People are so narrow-minded. Just fancy suspecting the Bergers! Why, he gave two hundred pounds to the Red Cross last month, and he supports two beds in the hospital!"

"That seems generous indeed for a man who has been here such a short time. I think you said he is not an old resident?"

"Oh, no, they only took Dymleigh Towers two years ago, and their coming has made such a difference to the place. They gave two balls last winter, and a garden fête and pastoral play the summer before the war. Of course they pronounce their name 'Berjer,' just as if they were English, and they talk without an accent, and, in fact, nobody would have so much as known that they were German if this about the naturalising had not come out."

"Stan's a jolly good sort," put in Larrie, determined not to be left out of the talk. "He was asking me the other day what your regiment is, Mornoch. He said it seemed a bit rum for an officer to be in mufti on long leave."

"Officers on long leave usually wear mufti, even in these martial days," replied Mornoch, with the glimpse of a smile. It stung young Lenox.

"It would be interesting to know why you *are* on long leave, anyway," he remarked, handing his empty cup to Sacharissa. "You're a pretty healthy convalescent, aren't you?"

"Well, they won't allow me to come before the Board oftener than once a month, unfortunately. So far they have turned me down regularly every time. However, I have hopes about my next attempt. These heart strains are tiresome things. They have a knack of lasting. Any other information that you and young Berger would like to have?"

Lenox was silenced, but his mind was still working upon the remarks made to him by Stanislaus Berger, when Captain Mornoch, late of the 4th Battlion Lyonnesse Regiment, was put up for honorary membership of the club at Luttermouth.

"These days one can't be too careful," Stan had said gravely. "One ought to know all about a chap in a little community like this."

To which young Lenox had replied that he found the fact of Mornoch's being put up for membership by the Squire all-sufficient for him; and the other had hastily agreed. Round about Luttermouth the Squire was sacrosanct, and, after all, the Bergers were mushrooms.

The talk now switched off to the story of the Haunted Well, and everyone was chattering at once. Mornoch, however, was still sitting with his head quite close to Sacharissa's, and Lenox was irritated because he could not hear what they were talking about.

Something had silenced Deirdre, and that was a wonder. She was discomfited because the Captain had caught her unawares. When telling her story to the breathless children she let herself go. The poetry and fire of her nature had been poured out in the tale she related. Then she had discovered that this stranger, before whom so far she had been tongue-tied, had been

an unseen listener. Her cheeks still hung out scarlet flags of distress. However, it seemed that she was disquieting herself needlessly, for he had apparently once more forgotten her existence. She watched Larrie's face grow darker and darker as the *tête-à-tête* went calmly on.

At last he could bear it no longer, and sprang up, his young face lowering.

"I'm off!" said he.

This had the desired effect of bringing Sacharissa to her feet.

"Off, Larrie! Oh, no, don't go. We want you to stay to dinner."

"Yes; we are going to play hide-and-seek all over the house after dinner!" cried the boys. "You must stay, Larrie."

"Oh, well," said Lenox, mollified, "but I can't stay in this kit." He glanced down at his thick stockings with fancy tops and huge boots. "I'll go home, have a look at the mater, change and come back in the car."

"Right!" said everybody, and he was escorted to the door and sent off with an injunction from the eager boys to "look slippy."

His mind, as he walked slowly down the hard frozen drive, was gloomy and full of indecision. A bad knock on the football field which had disabled him the previous winter, prevented his applying for a commission in 1914; and now, though his knee was almost well, he had delayed taking immediate steps to join the Army because he wanted to get things "fixed up" with Sacharissa before he went away.

A month ago he had thought that this would be a matter of little difficulty. Now he was less sure. This Mornoch! Who and what was he? Why was he there, if not for Sacharissa's sake? Lenox had many good qualities, but he was not particularly sweet-tempered.

His feelings towards the Squire's guest were not amiable.

As he tramped along the pitch dark lane which led to Ashtrees, his own place, he heard a step approaching, and a voice out of the darkness asked huskily:

"Is that Muster Lenox?"

Larrie pulled up sharply, and recognised the village constable.

"Hallo, Wilks! Want to speak to me?"

"Thought 'twas you, sir. Yes; there's something I would like to have a word on—something of importance, seemin'ly. It wur young Mr. Berger, he put me on to it, with a picture cut out of an illustrated paper. See here, sir, if you could stop a minute and hold my bull's-eye."

The two men stopped short in the shadow of the tall hedge, the policeman searched his pockets, produced a pocket-book, and extracted a newspaper cutting with a portrait. The paper was a journal published in the West Indies, and its date was then years back. It was headed:

THE MURDEROUS AFFRAY AT LOS AQUAS

DR. NIMMO DEAD

ARREST OF MR. MORNOCH

Below was a medallion portrait, which, almost beyond doubt, represented the guest at present enjoying the hospitality of Lutteridge Hall. He appeared, as was natural, far younger—certainly not more than two- or three-and-twenty. He wore no moustache, and his expression was gay and careless.

The letterpress contained an account of his having fought a mulatto doctor, who had been so severely punished that he died as a result of the encounter.

Mornoch was at the time running a sugar estate, and, according to the report of the proceedings, his account of himself and of his reasons for the savage onslaught upon a man universally respected in the island was unsatisfactory. At this point some very high official, an Administrator of a Colony, had stepped in, declared that he considered Mr. Mornoch justified in what he had done, and offered very large security for his future good behaviour.

The next cutting was a leading article, of later date, in which it appeared that the pro-native Press was making a dead set at Mornoch, declaring that he had defeated justice merely because he was an Englishman and had influential friends. It was, however, confidently asserted that he had made the place too hot to hold him.

A still later paragraph chronicled the disappearance of Mr. Mornoch and the sale of his estate.

Lenox read with surprise and some indignation.

"Did you say that young Berger gave you these?"

"Yes, sir. His uncle was a planter out in them Indies, who came over to England this autumn, and he said, when he heard the name of Mornoch, as how perhaps that was the chap that left Los Aquas under a cloud. Of course, they said as it was none of their business. Commander Devenish chose his own friends, but they was a bit surprised at his putting of him up for the club."

Lenox had reflected.

"Well, Wilks, I agree with that. Captain Mornoch's past life is no concern of ours. If the Squire goes surety for him, surely that is enough——"

"Ah, sir, but that is not all. Now comes something else. This"—with an overpowering air of mystery—"is professional secrets, and if you wasn't a J.P. yourself, Mr. Lenox, I would not open my mouth."

"All right. Well?" asked the young man impatiently.

"Well, sir, truth is, there's something that isn't right going on down at Luttermouth. There's signalling, and there's other things too; but least said soonest mended. It all began, curiously enough, just after Captain Mornoch got to Lutteridge. Now, sir, with my own eyes, twice have I seen Captain Mornoch coming along the Luttermouth road, going 'ome to Lutteridge, past twelve o'clock at night. Suppose the Squire knows that, sir?"

Lenox was surprised indeed.

"Wilks, are you sure?"

"I should 'ardly be fit for me place, sir, as a sergeant in the Devon Constabulary, if I could make a mistake on such a subject," said Wilks haughtily. "Then today, sir, I hear he has been all over the harbour works, and seen all kinds of things which the young gentleman said he wouldn't have no traitor see, not for a great deal. To put things plain, sir, I can see that young Mr. Berger has got the idea that the Captain is in the pay of a foreign Government. Anyway, we are going to keep a close look-out for one week from now. I am having the road just outside the Hall patrolled all night long, and the cliff path leading to the harbour. Shouldn't you think that was right, sir?"

"There can be no harm in it," said Lenox slowly, his cheeks reddening in the darkness.

"Young Parsons, who lives down along by the post office, he says there was signal flashes one night last week," said the constable meditatively. "'Keep your silly old eyes skinned,' he says, and I tells him, 'If you'd as little skin to your eyes as what I have, my lad, you'd see a deal more.'"

"You are quite right to mention nothing of this," said Lenox hurriedly. "What you tell me is very

disturbing. Shall you say anything to the Squire?"

"No, sir, and I hope you won't, neither. For why, the Squire would feel bound to protect his guest, and the next thing, our Captain would be off and we should never find out the rights of it all. No, sir, our course is to watch and wait, and then pounce. When we can give Squire black and white for it, he can't be angry with us. Don't you think so, sir?"

"Yes," said Larrie thoughtfully, "I see that. I believe you are right, Wilks. Look here! I'll think it over, and I should like to have another talk with you in the morning."

The constable agred to this eagerly. He was bursting with pride in his mysterious information, and to have discovered someone whom he could tell, without any thought of treachery, was bliss.

"I don't deny as it is a relief to be able to have it over with you, sir," he said. "It's a big responsibility, and it's no use going to headquarters till you're sure of. They've got no use for suspicions, and they won't give you an extra man for anything short of facts."

They separated, and the young man hastened Will Ashtree, his head literally buzzing with what vellery you heard.

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II

"What a glorious bet! diamond tiara, won't you,

WHEN Larrie Lenox agair family was assembled in the dr announcement of dinner. T' the look he cast upon the entered, was seated upo holding in his long, ner endless knitting activ

ried defiantly. She was e warmly flushed, and she of rage.

uld give you one," replied the

Yes! The black uely displeased, put in her word. he was sure the would take an unfair advantage of so

frontal bones and eyebrows a little raised at the outer ends, was the face of the man whose portrait appeared in the West Indian journal. A bad lot! And the good, simple Squire was welcoming him to the bosom of the family—apparently even considering him in the light of a possible son-in-law. He had never seen Sacharissa so animated.

Deirdre, with the four children and the schoolboy guest, was seated at an old buhl table, playing the vulgar game of "Up, Jenkins!" There was a good deal of noise, giggling and squeals, and a running thread of laughter. As Larrie walked in, the boys shouted to him to come to the table. The girls demurred. It would make an odd number, and Larrie was a formidable acquisition.

"We ought to have invited Stan Berger," remarked Lucy.

"Why didn't you?" inquired Larrie, sitting down. He was always very cordially disposed towards Mr. Berger junior, since he discovered that the young man preferred Deirdre more than Sacharissa.

of a fe Deirdre always says 'No'; she doesn't like keep a c t in Charles eagerly; and Lucy flashed back: having the rse you boys would like to keep Deirdre in long, and the ody but you should ever look at her. you think that was ri tan; it is you that won't have him

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"You are quite right to mention

said Lenox hurriedly. "What you eparated Deirdre

from both young men at dinner. They sat one on either side of Saska, while Deirdre was next her uncle at the lower end, with the schoolboy guest for her other neighbour.

This being so, she was laughing and talking freely, but more than once she was brought up short by finding the steady gaze of Captain Mornoch fixed upon her. In truth, he missed very little of what passed among the younger ones, though all the while yielding to Sacharissa a polite attention, and seeming not to notice how openly the girl wooed him in the very teeth of her devoted Larrie.

Hide-and-seek all over the house was to be the pastime after dinner, and Deirdre was presently heard begging that she might be allowed to be the first to hide.

"I have hit on such a good place," said she; "nobody will ever find me."

"You hide very well, I know, but I will undertake to say that I shall find you," said the distinct voice of the guest, speaking all down the table.

Deirdre positively jumped.

"Why," said she, "you sound very boastful. Will you bet upon it?"

"I will. You shall have any article of jewellery you choose to demand, while, if I win, you must give me the Christmas roses from your hair."

"Done!" shouted the boys. "What a glorious bet! If she wins she will ask for a diamond tiara, won't you, Deir?"

"Suppose I did?" she cried defiantly. She was laughing, but her cheeks were warmly flushed, and she was conscious of a kind of rage.

"If you did, I should give you one," replied the guest instantly.

Sacharissa, vaguely displeased, put in her word.

"Some girls would take an unfair advantage of so

generous an offer, Captain Mornoch," said she in her sweetest tones.

"But not Miss Nugent, I am sure. To ask for a diamond tiara would be not the least unfair, but I hope, nevertheless, that that is not what she will desire."

"Why?" asked Saska eagerly.

"Because it could not be half as becoming as the Christmas roses," was the grave reply.

"We had better turn the conversation to the subject of Captain Mornoch's personal appearance, I think," cried Deirdre, stung by this remark, which seemed to treat her as if she were a child.

"Really, Deirdre, you seem unable to take a joke," said Sacharissa with her least pleasant smile. Never had she so desired to conquer as in the case of the new guest, with his subtle silences and his pungent speech. It occurred to her for the very first time to think her cousin "forward."

For the rest of dinner she contrived to keep the talk of both gentlemen to their own end of the table.

Directly dessert had been disposed of, the children rushed pell-mell into the hall, followed by the elders, including even the Squire, who, in spite of protests, looked as though he enjoyed what his sons called a "bit of a rag."

"So I made you angry at dinner?" asked Mornoch of Deirdre, who was pouring coffee, and for the moment was alone at the little table, the family clustering round the hearth.

She looked at him resentfully, but with an expression intended for contempt. "You take me for a child, and it is a good game to tease children," was her reply.

"I didn't mean to tease," said Mornoch slowly.

"No? What then?"

"To challenge."

She raised her head on that, looking him in the face to see what he meant. For the first time in her young life she saw a glimpse of a man's soul through his eyes.

"Isn't it true that you are always hiding?" he ventured, low and hurriedly. "You pretend to be a petulant child; you won't show yourself to me. But I shall find you. I am pretty good at finding when I make up my mind to search."

For a breathless moment they faced each other upon these words. The impulse to defy him was still paramount.

"I take your bet," she flashed.

He smiled.

"I thought you would." And with the words the boys rushed up and the curious moment ended.

Deirdre finished her coffee and sped off to hide, the search party waiting for five minutes by the great hall clock.

As Captain Mornoch and Sacharissa set off together in the wake of the eager herd, Larrie turned to the Squire with an air of determination.

"If you could wait a moment, sir, I should like to have a word with you." His manner was uneasy, and his host looked at him, faintly astonished.

"Well, out with it, my boy," said he good-humouredly. He thought most probably that he was to be asked to sanction his daughter's engagement.

"It's not much," said Larrie nervously, "but I think I ought to let you know something about your new friend, Captain Mornoch."

The Squire smiled.

"New is the wrong word, Larrie. I have known Leonard Mornoch since he was in velvet suits."

"Oh!" The young man was manifestly taken aback. "You—er—know his record—er——"

"His record?" The tone was dry. "Are you suggesting——"

"I am suggesting that there may be things in Captain Mornoch's past which you don't know," said Larrie bluntly. "I mean, which you don't know and the police do."

"*The police!* . . . And what, if I dare inquire, have the police to do with Captain Mornoch?"

"Why, of course, that is just it. I felt sure you could not know. I—— Oh, ten to one there is nothing in it; but something or other has put the police on his track, and I thought I ought to give you a hint, as it would be so confounded unpleasant for you if—if anything——"

"Thanks," said the Squire quietly. "What you tell me is very interesting. It throws a new light upon the intelligence of our local constabulary, which I confess I have not hitherto rated very high. Something, you say, has caused the police to suspect my guest. Some*thing,* was it—or some*body,* do you suppose?"

Larrie coloured.

"Well," he said, "it was somebody, I own. I had better perhaps say no more. It seems that you only think me impertinent and interfering. Your guest has, it appears, the habit of prowling about the coast late at night. He has lived much abroad, and just now, in the state of the country, people are apt to be suspicious, especially as something in the way of signalling seems to be going on down here. But please understand that I don't want to butt in."

"As you have said so much, perhaps you will just say a few words more. Of what, exactly, was it that you wished to warn me?"

"That the various ways down to the coast from this

house will be watched every night for a week from now. If Captain Mornoch goes down there he is likely to be arrested."

The Squire looked grave.

"How many assistants has Wilks? I thought he was the only constable in the village?"

"The coastguards are to help him."

"Ah, I see! Leaving the harbour and the bay unwatched?"

Larrie hesitated.

"I suppose they can't be in two places at once," he admitted reluctantly. "They think they have a strong case against Captain Mornoch. However, he has only to refrain from going out late at night, and they will see that it is all a mare's nest, as I see you yourself believe."

"Thanks, Larrie. You have done quite right to speak. I appreciate your friendship. Meanwhile, you may take it from me that the great Wilks has the wrong sow by the ear, as we say in our refined West Country."

"Thank you," said Larrie, relieved. "Sorry if I've been a goat, but I didn't want Mornoch to walk into the arms of a coastguard. I'll be off now; they don't seem to have found Miss Deirdre yet. She said she had a fine place in her mind."

At the end of a corridor, on the first floor at Lutteridge, was a small room, half office, half study, wherein laboriously the Squire cast up accounts and transacted the business connected with his ancestral acres.

Just above the low wainscot, behind his chair, hung an old picture, behind which was a large cupboard, known as the secret panel. It was filled with files of old newspapers. Perhaps for this reason, perhaps on account of a story of haunting in this room, it had never

been used as a hiding-place. Deirdre curled herself up quite comfortably upon a newspaper throne, and heard with glee the sweeping past of the hunt. She listened for some minutes to the sounds faintly borne to her, now near, now dying quite away. When she had been sought in vain for a quarter of an hour, the big gong would sound in the hall, and she would emerge victorious. Time crept on; she was sure she must shortly hear the signal, when she heard the door of the room behind whose wall she was concealed open and shut sharply, and her uncle's voice broke the silence—sounding almost as plainly as if no panel were between.

"Sorry to interrupt your game, Mornoch, but this is important."

Thereupon Mornoch's voice in answer thrilled Deirdre's pulses.

"No; it can't be as important as the winning of my bet. Won't you wait until I am on the track of that will-o'-the-wisp Deirdre?"

Deirdre, when she heard him speak, kept silent, because of his boast that he would find her. She dared not move, though she realised with shame that she was eavesdropping.

"Nonsense," said the Squire abruptly. "Lenox has just been telling me something that you must hear. Sit there a minute, I'll tell you. The first arrival is expected this week——"

"Lenox told you *that?*"

"No, no. He told me something quite different. He told me that old Wilks has been got hold of——"

"The fat bobby? Negligible, my dear John, negligible!"

"For the sake of common sense, Leonard, let me speak! Poor old Wilks has been persuaded that you are not what you seem. He has been advised to watch all roads from this house to the harbour every night this

week. In order to do this he must call the coastguard men off their beats. Then, you see, while attention is concentrated on this house——"

Mornoch gave a long, soft whistle.

"I see—my word, but I see!" he said thoughtfully. "Now—now—how is this to be circumvented? . . . H'h, h'm! I must leave here, methinks. Yes! I must leave, so that at the last moment the coastguards will be at their places, and that alone will disconcert our dear friends at Dymleigh Towers! I never in all my life felt so reluctant to leave any place as I now feel to leave Lutteridge." He paused a moment and then added heavily, "I won't go! I can't!—I simply can't tear myself away! . . . What put them on my scent, I wonder?"

"Simply the desire to throw the village off theirs, I should say. You are the only stranger about here. It is a real difficulty, though. If you leave, they could not send anybody else until too late."

"No other town big enough to hide in within miles," ruminated Mornoch, who seemed to be sitting with his head thrown back against the frame of the picture behind which Deirdre crouched.

"There is a way," said the Squire deliberately. "I hardly like to suggest it—but the story that child Deirdre was telling in the hall this evening gave me an idea."

"By Jove! The Haunted Well! Does the apparatus work now?"

"It does, and the room, though very small, is ventilated. It would be abominably uncomfortable, and you would be entirely dependent upon me. I should have to provision you, and to draw you to the surface at night. Not one of our servants would venture after nightfall into that courtyard, and no window in the inhabited part of the house overlooks it."

"It really sounds feasible, Devenish. But I must plan a mock departure, must I not?"

"Yes. I think I see how that could be done. But are you counting the cost of this thing?"

"My dear sir, I have known the interior of a jail in the tropics! Does one look for couches of rose leaves when one starts out upon a job like mine? It is a fine idea, to my mind, and you see I shan't have to leave Lutteridge after all."

"I'm flattered," said the Squire, wondering if his minx, Saska, was going to chuck poor Larrie for the sake of Mornoch's long green eyes.

"Well," said his friend lightly, "let us talk this over later when our absence won't excite comment. Just now I am on a game of hide-and-seek, and as a most expensive bet hangs upon my success, don't be vexed with me if I dart away to make one last effort to keep my end up."

She heard her uncle laugh; heard him say, "What a boy you are!" and Mornoch's gay retort as he ran out:

"Well, come to that, I'm a young man yet!"

The Squire took two or three impatient turns in the room, then, as it was cold, he too went out and banged the door after him.

The girl who was left was shivering with excitement. She had done a disgraceful thing, but she felt no penitence. Every pulse in her thrilled to the thought of the coolness of the man who was cheerfully agreeing to be incarcerated in the Haunted Well.

There was nerve for you! She sat on her heels, wringing her little hands tightly together and thinking how fine it was to be a man, mixed up in some deed of secrecy and daring! Was it possible that the popular Bergers should be traitors? She remembered, with a shiver, how she had always hated Stan Berger.

At the moment the thunder of the gong announced that her time was over. She had won her bet!

Never in all her life had she known such excitement as possessed her when she made her appearance in the hall, and was received with yells and shouts of triumph by the boys, her unfailing allies.

"Where were you, Deirdre?" cried Lucy and May.

"As if I should tell! I'll hide there another time. I knew it was a good place."

"What is Captain Mornoch to give you? Go on! Ask for the tiara!" clamoured everybody.

Mornoch, his hands behind him, stood gazing with that quizzical expression which the young girl resented. As she met his eyes, the self-consciousness bred in her by the thought of what she knew paralysed her will for the time being. Mornoch had never seemed so light-hearted. He had suddenly put from him his old grave manner. She turned away, saying pettishly that the bet was off. She had bet on a certainty, and that disqualified the whole transaction.

"Indeed, Deirdre, I think you're right," observed Sacharissa primly. "I am sure papa would not approve of your taking jewellery from Captain Mornoch; it is just what he would dislike."

"Well, I never," shouted Hugh at once, "didn't Larrie give you a bracelet last Christmas?"

"Ah, but then Saska is Saska and I am I," replied Deirdre, unable to keep back the bitter little speech, though ashamed of herself for uttering it.

Never had she appeared in so disagreeable a light. During the five minutes' wait while Charles went off to hide she talked only to Baines, the shy boy guest, while Saska sat beside the Captain and in an undertone begged him to excuse her cousin.

"You may think her manners bad," said she pityingly, "but if you could have seen her as she was when

she first came to us!" A deep sigh filled in the picture. "Her father was killed in the Boer War, when she was quite tiny, and my aunt, her mother, had to sell all her jewels to pay his debts. The Nugents kept Deirdre for a while, after my aunt's death, but when my father went over to see her, he found her so neglected and running wild that he brought her here. I think mamma was afraid at first, but it has not turned out so bad as we thought it might."

"That's a good thing," replied the Captain, a trifle dryly.

Saska, however, never saw when she was boring a hearer.

"She really ought to have been a boy, you know," said she plaintively; to which all that he could find in reply was:

"Do you think so?"

He never got a chance to speak a single word to Deirdre after that, and she only called "Good night" to him from the stairs as she went up.

III

THE Squire escorted Larrie Lenox to the door that night when he was departing.

"By the by, with regard to that little talk of ours," said he, with a smile; "it's an odd coincidence that Mornoch has just told me he must go to London tomorrow. Leaving by the 10.15. That ought to relieve Wilks's mind—eh? I own I breathed more freely when I heard it, for there will be now, I trust, no need to take off the coastguards from their proper work, which struck me as a most unwise proceeding, in view of the rumours of which you tell me."

Larrie looked half relieved, half suspicious.

"You think Wilks mistaken?"

The Squire shrugged his shoulders.

"What does your own sense suggest? Mornoch is heir-presumptive of a good old Scots baronetcy. He is well off, and has a social position to maintain, besides holding the King's commission. Even if he were a traitor at heart, do you think he is likely to play so dangerous a game?"

Larrie pondered it as he walked home.

Everybody at Lutteridge was disgusted to learn next morning at breakfast that Captain Mornoch was going away. He told the boys, however, that they should take a less selfish view.

"Perhaps the old Medical Board is seized with a tardy fit of remorse, and has decided to let me through," he suggested. "Mr. Lenox, as you all heard, gave me a pretty stiff hint yesterday as to rejoining. I own I thought it came with a bad grace from a strapping fellow who ought to have been at the Front long ago."

Sacharissa hereupon launched into a long defence of Larrie's reasons for delay. Deirdre said nothing, nor did she add her voice to the chorus of lamentation. She was very gay all breakfast-time, but never glanced in Captain Mornoch's direction.

Later, when the car was at the door and everyone assembled in the hall to bid the guest farewell, Deirdre alone was absent.

The fact depressed Mornoch, but he would not show it. He assured May that he would come again, perhaps before very long, if the Medical Board was so cruel as to turn him down once more; and so was carried out of sight down the long avenue, where Sergeant Wilks was concealed to watch and make sure that this departure was a reality and no sham.

That night the Squire said he had promised the vicar that he would look in and help audit the parochial accounts. For this purpose he withdrew from the

family circle as soon as he had dined, and did not reappear until bedtime.

That night also Deirdre hardly closed her eyes. Before her vivid fancy floated the picture of Mornoch passing the hours of darkness alone in that awesome place. She was herself wonderfully fearless, but even she would not dare to lie there, hour after hour, in the confined space which had once been the scene of such torment. She wondered what kind of bed her uncle had provided; whether he had given his prisoner plenty of food; whether he had remembered to include one or two interesting books to turn the victim's thoughts from the ghastliness of the place.

And now he was there alone. What message would the silence bring? The groans of a strong man in agony; the restless pacing to and fro; the ever-renewed hope of rescue, perpetually disappointed? She suffered almost as much on behalf of Mornoch as though she herself had been in his place. She guessed that he would not emerge from concealment that night. But probably the next night he would be raised by the Squire, and they might quite possibly both of them go down to the coast. What was it they suspected? What was going on?

She had to lie still and control herself by main force. If she dropped into sleep, she dreamed instantly of the well, of cold touches laid upon her, of horrible sounds which affrighted her and caused her to start awake, trembling all over.

Next morning Saska was in very bad humour, for Captain Mornoch had departed without so much as even a special pressure of her hand. During the last few days of his stay she had succeeded in offending even the long-suffering Lenox. He made no appearance all that long, dull day, and Deirdre, weary as she was, found herself obliged to summon her forces to take the boys out and keep them amused, though her head

was splitting and she longed to indulge in a good long cry.

That night she exerted all her self-control and managed to rest fairly soundly. She watched the Squire's face narrowly during the next day, and felt sure that things were going well. He was preoccupied, but not anxious or depressed. Evidently the "mock departure" had answered the intended purpose and they were able, quite unsuspected, to keep an eye upon their enemies.

It was on the late afternoon of the fourth day that the telegram came—the long-delayed message from the Admiralty, bidding Commander Devenish report himself at Whitehall the following morning at ten o'clock. The first impression of which he was conscious was that of overwhelming joy. Here was, he hoped, the command he had craved so long in vain. His next feeling was of embarrassed recollection. What was he to do about Mornoch?

Time was short. When he had packed his bag and snatched a meal he must leave at once to catch the night express at Exeter. To draw his captive from the well was a long business, demanding all his strength. Even if he had time to do it before setting out, what could he do with him—where hide him? That the departed guest should be known to have returned would be fatal to all their plans; for the critical moment, the moment for which they were on the watch, was not, could not be, far off now.

Evidently, for the four-and-twenty hours of his absence, Mornoch must be left where he was. The authorities were sure to allow their new commander at least eight-and-forty hours to get his kit. He could hasten home and accomplish the release.

Deirdre, watching his face, saw the feelings chase each other across it, and, with her secret knowledge, read him like a book.

She and he had just finished having tea together, being, by a strange coincidence, the only ones at home that evening. Sachatissa and the children had gone to a big children's party, all packed into Larrie's huge touring car. Deirdre had remained at home, greatly to the boys' disgust, because she was the secretary of the local association for providing comforts for the troops. She had her accounts to balance, her articles to pack, by the following day. She stood now, with knitted brows and beating heart, watching her uncle as he ordered a bag for one night to be packed, and the motor to be at the door in an hour's time exactly. The harassed jailer then repaired to that little office where, so few nights ago, Deirdre had hidden herself. Sitting down he scribbled a hasty note, explaining the situation to Mornoch, who, he knew, would cheerfully accept twenty-four hours' incarceration sooner than endanger the plans now so completely laid.

Having written his note, Commander Devenish took a string bag, and, kneeling down, unlocked the cupboard at the foot of an old mahogany bureau. From within he extracted a tin of biscuits, a tin of butter, another of jam, a fourth containing Swiss milk. To these he added sardines and a tongue in glass.

Putting all these things carefully into the bag, he opened the door and looked forth into the corridor, which was known—none knew why—as the Nun's passage.

Nobody was about, so he came softly out, opened a narrow door in the opposite wall leading to a small backstair, and descended, rapidly and silently.

He emerged into the dark of the old haunted courtyard. So black was the moonless night that he could not even see the well in the centre. Nobody was about. The men had all gone home some time since, and no maid would go near this part of the domain after dusk,

nor was there anything to bring them thither, since no poultry nor pigs were kept here, only the big farm wagons and reaping machines.

The Squire was uneasy in his mind, for to-night must be perforce a wasted night. He saw no way to help that. Mornoch must remain, like the truth he sought, at the bottom of a well; and, moreover, he felt very uncertain of being able to attract his prisoner's attention.

As has been said, a long passage and an ascending corkscrew stair intervened between the well and the secret chamber. When Mornoch was in his room he could hear no sound. True, he frequently came down, in order to fill his kettle or to breathe fresher air than that of his dungeon, but as he was out most of the night, he had been acquiring the habit of sleeping by day. He would be certainly asleep at this moment.

Caution prevented any but low calling or soft whistling. Devenish was right. The man below was out of hearing. No reply came from the depths. All that he could do was to leave the bucketful of food hanging at the full extent of the chain, the note conspicuously on top of the pile. Long ago, when the exploration of the well chamber had been now and again permitted to the young folks, their father had arranged that the chain upon which the bucket hung should be made long enough to reach the threshold of the door and no longer, fearing that one day some child might be let fall low enough to touch the water.

The well was not often used, though the water was good. The farm labourers, if they wanted any, let down a small tin pail on a rope.

As the chain ran out, to his relief, Devenish felt the pull and the sudden slackening, which told that someone below had got hold. Hastily he leaned over—it

was pitch dark and he could see nothing—and spoke:

"The note explains all. I have not a moment to waste. Good luck!"

He heard a murmur—or so he thought—so did not linger, but made his way back through the little postern, and in a few minutes was sitting down to a hastily prepared meal. Before he had been eating long his niece slipped into the room, came to the table and took a seat, her expression, as she looked steadfastly at him, being so unusual as to arrest his attention.

"Hallo, miss, what is it?" he asked; and his brow contracted as she replied:

"There is something I must say before you go."

"Sorry, Deirds, but I can't listen. If you and Saska have fallen out, why, all I can say is you must fall in again. I have no time."

"It's nothing so silly as that," she replied her colour mounting and her voice unsteady. "It is of such great importance that you must listen before you go—please, please!"

"If it's a love affair it must wait till I come back," he said, speaking with added peremptoriness, because he felt his curiosity piqued.

"Oh, nothing of that kind, uncle, really! It is something I have done that I am ashamed of, and you will be angry—awfully, I should think."

"Out with it, then," he roared; "anything will be better than all this beating about the bush!"

Permission gained, she gulped, looked round, and seemed half inclined to bolt without speaking; but, thinking better of her fear, she pulled herself together and said breathlessly:

"I know where Captain Mornoch is."

"Well, by all——" He stared at her dumbly.

"Yes. I know by a disgraceful means. I listened. I was hidden—in the panel, you know, behind the pic-

ture—in your office the night we played hide-and-seek—the night you proposed the plan to—to him."

"Deirdre!" The Squire sprang up, leaning forward and striking his fist on the table. "Whom have you told? Answer me that, and the truth, if you please! Who, beside myself, knows of this?"

"Why, nobody," said she, looking up with a tear halfway down either cheek. "Of course I could not tell. I tried to forget that I knew myself. But when I heard that you had to go away suddenly, I thought you might want help. I—I could not wind him up, but I could take food or a message."

He had subsided again into his chair. He took up his glass and drained it before speaking again. Then he asked sharply:

"Are you to be trusted, I wonder? A will-o'-the-wisp like you?"

"Yes, I am," said the girl, short and sharp, facing him squarely, with her mouth set.

"Well, then, as you know so much I may as well tell you a little more. Listen carefully, for I must be off in a very few minutes' time. I have been to the well, and let down his bucket of food, with a note, telling him he must stay where he is for the next four-and-twenty hours. I shall almost certainly come back to-morrow for my things. If I should not, he will not worry, since he has plenty of food and knows I have been called away. Should I, for any reason, be unable to return, then, at ten o'clock on the evening of the day after to-morrow, you must lower him fresh food and a message. Should you have the nerve to go?"

"I know I have."

"Saying nothing to Saska or anybody else? Remember, the courtyard is haunted. You would have to go alone, and in the dark."

"What of that?"

He eyed her keenly. Then he drew from his pocket three keys tied together, and rapidly gave some directions. "One thing more. We must be prepared for all eventualities. Should anything quite unforeseen come about—as that I should be killed on the railway or anything—you had better tell Larrie Lenox where he is, and ask him to get him out for you."

"No!" cried Deirdre sharply. "Forgive me, uncle, but I know that would not be prudent. I do not trust Larrie; he is such friends with Stan Berger, and—and he hasn't much sense either. If I tell anybody, it will be Hugh; he is strong and sensible. He and I between us could haul up Captain Mornoch if necessary."

Her uncle laughed, not as though displeased. He was staring at her with a good deal of surprise.

"So be it," he said, "but I hope it may be unnecessary." His eyes ran consideringly over the usually elfish face, where now no dimples showed. Her mouth and chin were gravely set, and he thought the light of her Irish eyes, under the shadow of her soft, loose, hair, was like a fire burning steadily. A new thought came to him. "There is one thing more," he said, and broke off, hesitating obviously.

"I believe I can guess. Do you want me to keep a look-out on the cliff to-night?"

"Are you a witch? That is precisely what I was about to suggest. Should you not be afraid?"

She laughed, the dimples showing themselves for a moment.

"I should love it," said she.

"You must go alone, but I think you would not run much risk. I only want you to go along the cliff, past Dym Point, to that place where Hugh sprained his ankle, two years ago; do you remember?"

"Of course, I know it exactly."

"Could you get there without going along the road?"

"Quite easily. I know a dozen private ways down to the Dym Point cliffs. The boys and I always played smugglers there in old days."

"You must leave the house by way of the haunted courtyard, and when you get to the place, just below the seaward edge of the cliff, close to a big bramble—on the farther side of it—is a ledge where you can sit, looking straight out to sea. Take your watch with you, the electric torch out of the bureau, and a pencil and paper. At half-past one precisely you must flash your light straight out to sea, in a series, as follows"—he laid a paper on the table before her. "You can do that? It is not Morse; it is a private code."

"The boys and I have often done Morse. I can do this quite easily."

"Right. When you have done it, wait five minutes by your watch, and if no answer comes to you from the sea, repeat your signal. Then when you get answering flashes, note them down as carefully as you can. That is all. Go unseen, return unseen. If you are followed—if you see anyone about—don't show, hide. For you to be caught would be perhaps the downfall of all that Mornoch has in hand. I am trusting you with a great deal, Deirdre. I hardly know why."

"I am afraid it's because there is nobody else to trust," said she mournfully. "But, by God's help, I won't fail you. I am quick and ready. I don't think I shall be caught."

"Give me your hand, child," he said, as he rose from the table, "and vow, before God, that you will keep faith."

She clung to his hand with both hers, and said quietly, "Before God, I will keep faith."

IV

AFTER three nights' vigil and two restless days, Leonard Mornoch slept. He lay upon the mattress provided for him by the Squire, wrapped in a rug and an eiderdown quilt. A small oil-lamp, burning on a wall bracket, shed light upon his strange surroundings. There was no fireplace in the secret chamber, whose dimensions were ten feet by ten. There was a table, a chair, and a broad stone shelf, perhaps used as a bed in the old times, upon which now stood a couple of spirit stoves with which he could heat water and fill a stone bottle to prevent his feet from freezing. His coffee-pot, cup and saucer, plate, knife and fork lay beside the stoves.

There was a wash-basin and some towels, and some other necessaries.

The room was built entirely of stone, and the roof was vaulted, with an aperture, about six inches square, at the top of the vault, which served as a shaft through which air was admitted. In olden days a fire may have been lit in the centre of the floor, the smoke escaping as it could above.

On the table were writing materials and a few books. It was the identical table which bore marks of the madness of hunger of the distracted victim. Its massive edges had evidently been gnawed by teeth, and in all likelihood by human teeth. The chair, of oak, with heavy arms, belonged to the same early period. It was a weird place, and the captive was heartily tired of it.

But now he slept. He had taken off coat and boots, collar and tie. With three days' beard upon his usually fastidious chin, he looked, as he lay there, a wild figure enough. He had been occupying the long, dreary hours of solitude in writing. It was a childish thing to do,

as he knew full well. He had been inventing love-letters to Deirdre Nugent.

He told himself that the pastime was harmless. She would never see them. He was thirty-five and she was twenty-two. Moreover, it was war-time, and his own life was in constant danger, owing to the nature of the services he rendered to his country. But he had fallen in love as one may at three-and-twenty; and Deirdre, he was well persuaded, scorned him.

He solaced himself, therefore, by imagining that it had fallen out otherwise. He feigned himself plighted to her and she to him, and he thought what he might say to her under those glorious circumstances, were he a captive, deprived of the sight of her wonderful face. He was much surprised at the ability to write such letters which he seemed to himself to develop.

Now, in the light of the dim little lamp, he filled his sleep with dreams of her, dreams in which they were always together, though not always either safe or happy.

At last he awoke with a start.

All was still, all as usual. He looked at his watch and found that it was half-past nine in the evening. At half-past ten the Squire would come, let down his supplies, and draw him up for his night's watch. He rose and busied himself in preparing his evening meal, lit his spirit lamp, boiled his kettle, made himself coffee, cut up the remains of a loaf, and finished the cold sausage which had also served him for lunch. He felt so hungry that he also boiled and devoured a couple of eggs.

He quite enjoyed his meal, but by the time he had finished there was but little left in his larder.

When he had reassumed his coat, collar, etc., it was almost time for the Squire to visit him. He lit his pipe, put on his hat and thick overcoat, and went out, down a corkscrew staircase, and along a cold, narrow

passage to the well door. He usually left this open, as a further means of ventilation. To-night was so dark that he had to use his electric torch to guide his feet, for fear of falling out into the well shaft.

Reaching the entrance, he stood for a few moments inhaling the damp, cold air and smoking contentedly.

No sound came to him from above, and when he had waited a quarter of an hour he began to wonder; for Devenish was usually very punctual to his time. However, a thousand things might have occurred to delay him. The captive waited another quarter of an hour. His pipe was empty and he was very cold.

He pulled his torch from his pocket, flashing its light upward on the sides of the well. To his astonishment he now saw an object of odd shape, which seemed to him to be clinging to the opposite wall of the shaft. Further investigation showed him that this was the bucket. It was caught, or hanging, upon a big clump of polypodium fern which grew in an interstice of the wall.

It was far out of reach, for the well was exceptionally wide, and the clump of fern was not only on the other side, but well above his head. He could, however, see quite clearly that it was empty, since it was hanging half inverted, so that its contents, if it had been let down full, as usual, must have been precipitated into the water.

He could not get it. Had he been able to do so, he was certain he could climb out of his prison by the chain, and, in spite of the hazard of being seen, he thought he would have risked it to ascertain what was the matter.

However, he calmed himself. Some hitch had occurred, some unforeseen difficulty had delayed his friend. He would come when he could, and until he came the prisoner's duty was to keep vigil. Lighting another pipe he set to pacing the stone passage, to and

fro, to and fro. Thus the hours of the night wore on. Weariness inexpressible crept over him.

Towards morning he retired to his room for a while, in order to boil water and try to warm himself; yet he descended every hour to make sure that the bucket retained its curious position.

By eight o'clock the faint light of day glimmered down the shaft. He could hear the sound of men's voices, the rattle of a farm cart drawn out from the shed and harnessed. The Squire would not come now, could not be expected until nightfall, and meanwhile he had very little left to eat.

Returning to his prison he collected what scraps remained, and had breakfast—a remnant of cake, one egg, two dry biscuits and a bit of cheese. No Swiss milk was left, but he drank black coffee. Very little methylated spirit was left, but he thought he could manage to keep warm until relief came, as he felt sure it must, that night.

During the whole day the bucket remained just where it was, hitched upon the projecting clump of polypody. Each hour he grew colder—colder and more hungry.

Of course he occupied himself in futile efforts to guess what had happened. There was one hypothesis upon which he feared to dwell; Devenish might be dead. If so, the secret had died with him. Nobody else—nobody on earth—knew where he was. Unless he could contrive to escape, history would re-enact itself in the secret dungeon.

It was, however, by far the most likely supposition that suspicion had been in some way aroused, and that the Squire saw nothing for it but to keep quiet until it was allayed. In that case it was merely a question of time. His friend would know that he would have patience and confidence in him. He told himself this

many times, but by nightfall he was very depressed, cold and hunger both gaining upon him.

When midnight had past he began to believe the worst.

Well! If it were so—if Devenish had died suddenly, he did not mean to lie there passively. Somehow or other he would cut his way out, or force his way up, or make his voice heard above ground. His desperation was greatly increased by the reflection that he was caged, helpless, for a second night, during which the English submarine would wait in vain for signals, and the enemy have it all his own way.

For the present he was helpless, abandoned in that sinister spot with its dark and awful record of pain and anguish. As he sat by the table, once gnawed by a man in the agonies of starvation, the discomfort in his own interior growing hourly more acute, he felt the despairing influences of his dungeon begin to flow subtly all about him.

He began to believe himself watched by a baleful, unseen presence, which was deriving some unholy joy from the sight of his calamity. Only by exerting stern control could he shake off the horror of the idea.

Soon after midnight he boiled his last kettle, drank black coffee, and filled a hot-water bottle. In his empty condition the coffee had a terribly stimulating effect upon his brain. Horrible hallucinations visited him. He saw his forsaken predecessor in bodily form, a bearded, cadaverous figure, with gaps in his teeth and dim, bloodshot eyes, raving, screeching, beating the wall with bleeding hands, sucking the blood as it ran.

He never closed his eyes. It was a kind of waking delirium. By morning he came slowly back to command over himself, but felt as if he should never sleep again. Cold water formed his breakfast, and when he had drunk it he gave his mind to an attempt to dislodge the

bucket from its perch. He had a kind of boat-hook with which he was accustomed to catch the chain and draw in the descending stores. He detached the short cord from the little pail he used to dip up water and tried to lasso the thing. In vain! In the narrow width of his doorway he could get no purchase, no force to fling. He determined, if nobody came that night, to hack off a leg from his table, tie it to the end of the boat-hook, and thus detach the thing that dangled so temptingly above his head. Yet he knew the cutting off, with no tools but table knives, of a leg of that massive oak would be the work of hours and hours.

The sides of the well were covered with a wet green film, and at the level where he stood there were few chinks. Above, near the mouth, the ferns had found more foothold, but the clump which had detained the bucket was the lowest on the wall. To creep out thus seemed to him barely possible.

For him the hours of that brief winter's day were endless. When night fell he dragged himself slowly up his spiral stair, feeling too exhausted to trouble very greatly as to what might come next. He huddled himself under all the wraps he could collect, and lay on his mattress for warmth. Before he knew it, he had sunk into a state, half sleep, half stupor, in which he was at least safe from the sinister visions which black coffee and starvation had combined to produce.

V

THERE was much excitement among the young people when they returned home and heard the news of their father's summons to London.

Sacharissa brought back in her train not only Larrie, but Stan Berger, to spend the evening—the former

for her own pleasure, the latter chiefly to annoy Deirdre, who notoriously disliked him.

The sight of young Berger produced a curious effect to-night upon the Irish girl. Her fighting instinct arose in her, the consciouness of the secret she held made her long to outwit him.

As a rule, Stanislaus avoided the Manor House during the boys' holidays, since at such times it was almost impossible to get a word with Miss Nugent. To-night, however, the boys were tired out. They had eaten and drunk so much that they declined to sit down to dinner, and they and the little girls drifted away to bed, leaving the four grown-up young people to sup together unchaperoned.

It was a gay little party. Of course the circumspect Miss Devenish would not have dreamed of such a thing had she had any idea of her father's sudden departure, but as things had fallen out, who could blame her?

They sat round the hall fire after supper, talking in couples. Sacharissa and her lover presently retired together to the grand piano, entrenched behind which they sang duets—with intervals.

Stan, for almost the first time in their acquaintance, found himself *tête-à-tête* with Deirdre, and though his mind was at the moment concentrated upon far other pursuits, he yet felt a little delirious at the situation.

She sat, work in hand, in the corner of a big Chesterfield. By her side a small table held her basket and a rose-shaded electric lamp. She was demure and sedulously occupied, but not so stand-offish as he had hitherto found her.

"So Captain Mornoch has gone," he remarked, after they had chatted of many things.

"Oh, yes! Several days ago. We have almost forgotten him already," replied the girl indifferently.

"I understand he is a very old friend of the Squire."

"His family is. I mean, I think Uncle John knows his brother better than he knows him."

"Ah! That explains a good deal," said Stan, in a meaning way.

Deirdre laid down her work and flashed a glance.

"Explains—what?"

He laughed gently.

"Well, it's a curious position. As it happens, I know a good bit more about the great Captain than your uncle does. And as what I know is, I am sorry to say, not much to the gentleman's credit, I was in a bit of a difficulty. However, I don't think it was my place to take a hand, do you?"

"Certainly not," said Deirdre, considering him attentively. "The Squire would not have thanked you for bringing him tales about his friend and guest."

"Just what I supposed. Therefore I held my tongue. I am glad to know that I did right. Of course," he added, noting the compression of her mouth, "under ordinary circumstances I should not have thought of saying anything, but these are not ordinary circumstances. This is war-time."

"You mean?"

"That a man of bad character may in these days be a menace not only to a private family, but also to the State."

Deirdre smiled, as if relieved.

"Oh, the State," said she, almost contemptuously. "The State may take care of itself as far as I am concerned. I am Irish, you know."

There was so much intention in her voice and in her eyes that Stan dropped the cushion tassel he was playing with, and faced her in sudden excitement.

"I can't help wondering," said the girl, "that you yourself are so keen upon England—silly old bumptious

England, too blind to see the greatness of other nations. If I were you——"

"Well, yes? If you were I——"

"I am not sure, but I think—yes, I think I should be a patriot, no matter what the risk."

"Good heavens, do you say that?" whispered tthe young man, under his breath.

"I say it—but only to you," replied Deirdre in like manner.

He sat there for a while like a man struck dumb, his pale blue eyes feasting upon her.

"Irish rebel!" he said softly. "Beautiful, brave Irish rebel! Whatever the nation of my birth may do, one thing is certain; she will never hurt Ireland."

"Oh, no," smiled Deirdre, as if the thought gave her much satisfaction. "She wouldn't, I feel sure. However, I suppose you do right to be on England's side. You have your own business interests to consider."

She said this with an indescribable air of making allowance for a contemptible piece of cowardice, and she saw Stan wince. He was, however, no fool. He had not the least intention of committing himself. Nor did Deirdre expect it. She only meant him to doubt her own loyalty to England, in order that, should she by any chance be seen upon her expedition to the cliffs, some reason other than the real one might be suggested to him.

"Well," said Stan, controlling himself with an effort, "as things have turned out I am very glad we did not bother the Squire about his guest. Lenox and I were just debating as to whether we should make a fuss about his having been made an honorary member of the club. He was everlastingly down there, you know, buttonholing people, and then, all of a sudden, we heard he had gone. Quite unexpected, wasn't it?"

"Well, I know nothing about it, but I don't think

the Squire expected it. He seemed to think Captain Mornoch would stay some time."

"Where did he go?"

"To London, I believe."

"I can't help wondering," mused Stan, "whether somebody gave him a hint—whether it came to his ears in some way—that his West Indian reputation had reached Luttermouth."

As he spoke, his pale eyes were fixed meditatively upon Larrie, just now laughing joyously over some private joke with his beloved. Young Berger had a supreme contempt for Larrie.

It was quite late when the two young men said their final "Good night" and went off together down the drive. Sacharissa was in no amiable mood. She had brought Stan back only solely to vex Deirdre, and behold Deirdre had flirted with him—a thing she had never done before.

Miss Devenish made a few pointed remarks about this conduct before retiring to rest. Deirdre took it laughingly, and made no attempt to retaliate.

In her own room, with the door fast locked, she took off her pretty white gown and attired herself in her shortest tweed, with thick stockings, placing her nailed boots beside her bed. Then she lay down and slept for a couple of hours as quietly as a baby, awakening without an effort, just as the clocks were striking two.

Tiptoeing to the door she opened it, glanced right and left, and, all being quiet, crept upon stockinged feet to the swing door that led to the Nun's passage. Once through it she had little fear of being seen or heard. The two farther doors—that at the top of the stairs and that at the foot—were quickly negotiated, and she found herself in the haunted courtyard. All was dark as pitch, not a ray in the moonless, cloudy heavens. She sat down on the lowest step, laced her boots by feeling,

not sight, and then stood up, softly closed and locked the door behind her, and moved stealthily across the yard, lighting her steps with the torch she carried.

She resisted firmly the temptation to go to the well and look in. Her uncle had bidden her not meddle with the captive until the third night of his absence. Every inch of ground was familiar to her when once she was outside the yard. She stole on, therefore, as silently as she could, and presently found herself in a long, sheltered nut-path, whence a stile would bring her to a little plantation that extended irregularly down to the cliffs, and would cover her approach almost all the way.

As she crept softly towards the limit of the little wood and drew near the wide track which traversed the top of the cliffs at that point, she heard footsteps and low voices. Instantly she stepped aside, melting into the undergrowth that edged the narrow track she trod. Dark as was the night, it was not too dark for her to be able to preceive forms moving against the sky as she peered between the tree-trunks. She saw that two men, muffled to the ears, were approaching along the cliff path from Luttermouth, going to pass the spot where her uncle had bid her watch. Just as they reached as it were the tip of the wood within which Deirdre lay concealed, they stopped short.

"It must have been hereabouts, just hereabouts," said one softly.

"Here?" was the reply, in a guttural voice. *"Um Gotteswillen, was für ein Abgrund!"*

"It's not so steep as it looks," replied the first speaker, who was almost certainly Stan Berger. "It is quite easy to conceal ourselves just under the brow of the cliff and watch. We must catch anybody that comes. But, as I have already told you, I think you will have your trouble for nothing, for they are both gone."

"Both? What do you mean?"

"I mean that not only is the spy gone, but the old man too; Devenish went to London to-day."

"Ha! S-s-so!" returned the other voice, very German in intonation.

"Yes. I spent the evening at the Manor, and I am quite sure that it is no pretence. They are really gone, and to London. I ascertained that, and also that the young people have no suspicion at all."

"If they are gone it is to tempt us. They withdraw in order to see what will happen. Well, if so, we had better hasten matters and begin to be active before their return. Shall we make our first venture on Thursday, think you?"

Their voices fell so low that the next few sentences were inaudible to the listener. The next words that she caught came from Stan, and he spoke a little crossly.

"I tell you that we are wasting our time here. There is nobody who could conceivably signal in the absence of the two men. The boys are too young to be trusted, and the only member of the party clever enough to be of any use—Miss Nugent—is not too favourably disposed towards the country of her adoption. She is Irish, and ardently Nationalist."

"Inteet! Inteet! But that is interesting. Can you not do something wiz her if that be the case?"

"I—I hardly know," muttered Stan, with a sigh so loud that Deirdre heard it distinctly.

"You are sure," went on the other after a pause, "zat dey haf no accomplice in de village?"

"Quite sure. Wilks, the constable, is an absolute ass. He is at this moment patrolling the avenue leading to the Hall, in case somebody comes out of the front door. His assistant is just outside the stable yard."

"H'm! Zen in zat case you are probably right. We

waste our time here. We had better go down to ze dock and see if any signals haf come."

They turned, and were on the point of departure, when Stan said:

"Wait here a moment, I may as well creep down the cliff path, and make quite certain that nobody is there or has been there to-night. I piled up a few stones in the path so that nothing could pass without knocking them over."

His companion agreed, and Stan hastened to the precipitous little rocky track, among bramble bushes and tufts of sea-thrift, which led from the summit to the spot identified by the Squire as "the place where Hugh sprained his ankle."

He was not long absent. In about five minutes he came back, saying:

"Nobody is there, and nobody has been there. I made a kind of German eagle of small stones in the path, and it is there still, no foot has dispersed it."

"It is well then. Either these two have been recalled, or perhaps they have told their Secret Service there is noting here to be anxious about; or dey have gone to fetch more men, in which last case we must be quick, too quick for them. Come on."

The sound of their steps grew fainter and died away altogether.

As soon as she was certain of being alone, Deirdre emerged from the wood. She was over half-an-hour late for her appointment, but what she had overheard might be held to compensate, even if she should miss the signals. With celerity she let herself down upon the tiny, wriggling path, her torch held carefully towards the ground in order to descry and avoid the German eagle lying in wait to trap her. Even when on the look-out for it, she had some difficulty in not stepping upon it; but she succeeded, and in a few minutes was seated

in her look-out niche, just where her uncle had described it. Often had she sat there with a book in summer weather, gazing out at the blue waters; in fact, it was her curled-up body which had made it into so suitable a perch for observation.

Bringing out her pencil and paper, and keeping an eye upon the curious lines of dots and dashes which represented the signal she was to make, she flashed on steadily until she had completed the formula. Then, raising to her eyes the field glasses she carried, she watched the murky, pitch black gloom, where she knew the ocean to be. Nothing stirred. No light was visible. Then she remembered that her uncle had bidden her wait five minutes and signal again. This she did, very carefully, and at the end her heart was beating loudly and her throat swelling with eager excitement.

Yes! Yes! There! Far out to sea a light showed, giving the long, steady beam which signified "I am going to speak."

Her pencil and paper were ready; she transcribed each flash, swelling with pride at her success.

It was over. Darkness again fell, universal, choking darkness. She waited until she could be sure that no more was coming through, and then rose, almost forgetting the German eagle in her haste, and scrambled back upon the path.

Her breath came hurriedly, her heart hammered wildly, for she knew that the lights across the sea might have been seen by the two men upon their way back, and they might be even now runnning back at top speed to intercept her. In fact, just as she gained the edge of her sheltering wood she heard the sound of rapid footsteps.

Over the fence she went and away through the undergrowth, afraid to use the torch to guide her feet lest

its light should betray her, and, in consequence, stumbling a good deal, since there was no path in the place where she ran. Pausing after a few minutes she listened. At first she thought all was still. Then came a murmur of distant voices, and she guessed that somebody was about to enter the wood.

Just beyond the place where she stood the path began, leading direct to the nut-walk, which in its turn led direct to Lutteridge Hall.

She dare not trust her own speed, the pursuers would almost certainly overtake her. She knew where she could go, and what she could do.

In a couple of minutes she had rolled down into a dry section of ditch, thick with red beech leaves, and had covered herself entirely with these. The trees were so thick above that very little rain ever penetrated here, and her covering was almost dry. She lay panting, but silent, straining her quick ears for every sound. Soon she heard the snapping of twigs, the various small indeterminate sounds of persons groping among trees in the dark.

"I can't hear a thing," said Stan, quite near her.

"We waste time," said the other. "They was not here, but along the cliff path gone. Turn back, ve catch them."

"Just beyond here there's a path that leads to the house. I know it. I have been along it in the daytime. If you keep on just the least bit farther we shall find it," said Stan, who was apparently out of breath.

"Ha! you are right—quite right. It is here. Shall we hasten on?"

Stan hesitated.

"No, better not. If someone did come along here they will just have time to slip in ahead of us; but it seems to me impossible that it should be anybody from the Hall. If it were, they would not go straight

back there. Let us get to the cliff path again and run for all we are worth."

"I saw a shadow, I am certain of it," replied the German. "But I am fairly sure it up ze path ran. Turn back. Quick! We have lost ziz by reason of your blunder."

They had actually turned back! Deirdre in her ditch chuckled softly in her glee. She lay until she was sure of their departure, and then crept out, found the path, ran like the wind, reached home, and found herself shaking from head to foot, yet exultant and gay, having not only done as she was told, but collected valuable evidence.

VI

WITH acute excitement did Deirdre next day await news from Uncle John. A telegram from him was received at about twelve o'clock, to the following effect:

"Unable to return to-day. Appointed to command *Jason*. Write me at Grand Hotel. Definite instructions later. Pack all my things."

Deirdre was able to obtain a sight of this message, for the boys intercepted the bearer in the avenue and opened the telegram. She repaired at once to her own room, and sat down to write an exact account of her last night's adventure, with a transcript of the signal which had reached her from out at sea. This letter she decided to post herself, as it was not customary for her to write to her uncle during his absence, and her doing so might provoke the questions she was so anxious to avoid. The boys were, as it happened, busy in the old nursery, constructing a scene for their toy theatre, so she got out her bicycle and slipped off unnoticed.

She could not help wishing that she dare lower a copy of the flashed signal down the well to the captive below. He must be very hungry for news. She had, however, passed her word to her uncle not to go near the well until the evening of the following day—that is, not unless or until circumstances rendered it quite necessary for her to mix herself up in so delicate a business. She knew how essential it was to do nothing that might attract notice from any quarter. Their own household was an unknown quantity, for many of the servants were new, owing to the wholesale enlistment of the younger men, indoors and out, and the departure of two valuable maids to train for Red Cross work. She had learned from the conversation between Stan and his uncle that their house was watched. She did not know to what extent the watching might be carried out.

In the village, as she had thought probable, she met Stan Berger. His surprise and pleasure were equal.

"Why," said he, "where's the bodyguard? It is a wonder to see you alone."

She laughed

"I didn't tell them I was coming," said she. "But I had to ride in to the post office to send a wire to my dressmaker. This is such a place to live in when one wants anything in a hurry, isn't it? Though it must seem shocking to be thinking of dressmaking at such a time as this, yet one can't go about in woad, even if England is at war."

"It never seems to matter what you wear," said he; "you always look perfectly lovely."

"It's you that are perfectly lovely to say it. A compliment like that cheers one up for the rest of the day! Do you know, I have been talking to Miss Jones at the post office, and she says that Trimmer, who lives up on the High Pitch, told her that everybody is sure

there is some treason going on, for there were lights flashing over the sea last night!"

Stan gave an angry laugh.

"More truth in that than in most of their lies," said he. "I am going to find out who works these lights, somehow."

"Oh, you are altogether too patriotic," she laughed. "I mean, on the English side. Of course, it would not be nice if the Germans bombarded the harbour and swept away your father's beautiful works. But if I were you I should send word to them that you were compatriots, and then they would let you alone, wouldn't they?"

"And so you would cheerfully see this little place shelled?" he asked, in a curious tone. "But what if a landing should be effected? How would you like German officers billeted at Lutteridge?"

"I expect they would be just as nice as those English officers that were billeted on you last autumn!" said the girl, with a little laugh.

He took her handle-bars.

"Let me wheel your machine some of the way home," said he beseechingly. "It is odd to hear anybody speak as you are speaking—so frankly and sensibly. Most people hereabouts talk as though the entire German nation were plague-stricken.'"

"You'll be remembering I told you yesterday that I am not English," said Deirdre artlessly.

Stan burst into sudden speech.

"Ah, what heaven it would be to have a girl like you for a wife! Somebody one dare trust—confide in!"

It was almost as unexpected to the speaker himself as to the girl beside him. As he saw her stiffen, he broke in desperately:

"Now don't! Please don't! It slipped out! I couldn't control it! But, of course, I know it is too

soon. I have had such a poor chance hitherto, but from the first it has been just the same with me. Forget I said it—forget that I presumed . . . don't, for pity's sake, let it make any difference!"

It took some time to efface the effect of his rashness, but Miss Nugent consented upon persuasion to pardon it. In fact, after a while, he found himself talking to her with less constraint than he had ever used in his intercourse with her.

"Your uncle still away?" he asked presently.

"Yes, we don't know when to expect him; it depends upon the Admiralty, you see."

"They have given him a command?"

"Yes, at last. He is so pleased; he has been chafing to get away."

"Naturally. What ship? Do you know?"

Deirdre drew in her horns.

"Oh, we shall hear definitely later, I expect."

"I see, you don't really trust me," said Stan, in a hurt voice.

"Trust you?" she replied airily. "What, with Great Britain's secrets? I expect you are as much to be trusted as I am, but she doesn't confide them to me."

"I believe I am a bit better informed than you in this particular matter," he went on, piqued by her baffling air. "I was in Plymouth not long ago, and heard the *Jason* was being put into commission. Most of them down there thought your uncle very likely to be her first commander. I wonder if he will be able to sail past our bay? It would be fine to have a look at her!"

"That it would!" cried Deirdre gleefully. "I don't expect there are any U-boats in our little cove!"

It was said with no suggestion of *arrière-pensée;* but as she uttered the words she happened to glance up

full into Stan's face. It might have been the magic of her gaze, but something or other caused him to grow distinctly red, and Deirdre felt that she understood everything in a flash. The Bergers' wharf was being used as a supply base for submarines! This was what Captain Mornoch was there to investigate—this was the reason of the Bergers' attempt to blacken his name and get rid of him! The *Jason*, with Uncle John on board, would be torpedoed somewhere between Plymouth and Luttermouth!

For a minute or two she felt physically sick, inclined to flee as fast as she could from the neighbourhood of this scoundrel, whose admiration made her feel positively defiled. Then she collected herself.

"I have a great mind," she declared lightly, "to come out myself upon the cliffs and see if I can detect this signalling they talk of."

"Oh, I shouldn't do that," said Stan hastily.

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . perhaps, as you say, it might be rather fun," he amended, becoming suddenly aware of all that it might mean for him if he could persuade the girl to such a frolic.

"Let me see," he reflected aloud, "to-night is Wednesday—couldn't you come to-night? Or possibly Friday?"

Deirdre on her side had done some rapid thinking. She heard Thursday mentioned as she lay lurking in the wood.

"I could manage Thursday better," said she meditatively.

"Thursday, unfortunately, is the one day that won't do for me," the young man regretted politely. "I have to go away."

"Then it will have to be Friday; I can't manage to-night," sighed the lady of his heart. She had taken her determination. Whatever was going on she decided

that on Thursday night Captain Mornoch himself must be on the spot.

That night Deirdre could not sleep. She went to bed unusually late, but lay wakeful and restless hour after hour. She was inspired with an unreasonable desire to arise, dress, and go out to the well in the courtyard. Never had she found it so hard to resist an impulse. Only her unshakable loyalty to her uncle restrained her. She would not, by any slightest disobedience, endanger his plans. Yet, whenever she dropped into uneasy slumber a terror fell upon her, a dread of danger to the man in the dungeon. She almost thought he was calling upon her. Twice she started up in bed, awakened by the imaginary tones of his voice.

That morning there came a letter from the Squire, now transformed into Captain Devenish. The *Jason* was at Plymouth, and he was travelling from London that day to join her. His things were not to be sent to him until further orders, for he thought it just possible that he might be able to come and pick them up himself. The letter was, of course, addressed to Saska, but there was a postscript:

"As Deirdre was the only one at home when I left, I gave her some directions about reminding Grant to feed the pheasants. I hope she will not forget to tell him that I cannot be home for some days, perhaps not at all at present. I will send further directions, but he had better give food to-morrow as arranged, I think, unless he has strong reason to the contrary."

This was ingenious. The boys were interested in the message. The pheasant rearing was an experiment which the Squire was trying upon an estate where the shooting was usually considered negligible. Hugh and

Charles volunteered to walk to the keeper's cottage and give the message, and Deirdre promised to accompany them.

She passed that day in a vague, restless dream. Something was tugging at her consciousness, like a summons, all day long. Her heart was at the bottom of the Haunted Well. It seemed to her that ages had rolled over her head since the evening when they had played hide-and-seek—the evening when he was still among them, when he boasted that wherever she should hide he would find her. The boys had several times mentioned the promised tiara, and wondered whether Mornoch had ordered it yet. "He was quite a decent chap, if he was a bit of a stick-in-the-mud," as Hugh remarked. "He wouldn't be likely to forget a bet with a lady."

The interval between dinner and bedtime seemed to the Irish girl to be dragged out for centuries. Would Saska never take her feet off the big sofa and yawn her way up to her warm, firelit room?

At last she did. They all disappeared. By degrees she heard the household come up to bed. Darkness and silence fell.

At the first moment that she considered prudent, Deirdre was up and doing. She had busied herself, as soon as she reached the haven of her own room, by making hot tea and filling a Thermos flask with it. She argued that the captive's stores must be nearly exhausted, and it would be so nice for him to be able to have a hot drink without the bother of lighting his stove. She also prepared delicious sandwiches, having purloined a loaf from the cook's fresh batch of bread before it could be missed. These things she took with her as she hastened to the office to fill a large string bag from the Squire's hidden stores. When she had secured all that she thought would be necessary, she went out,

as she had done on the former occasion, putting on her boots at the foot of the stair.

She gained the haunted courtyard. It was as dark as pitch. A veil of cloud hid the moonless skies. She crept forward with the greatest care, not using her torch for fear of some hidden watcher, but making for the place where she knew the well stood. She found it, but was forced, after fumbling in vain for the bucket, to make a light to guide herself. Then she saw, to her amazement, that the chain was unrolled to its full extent. The bucket was in the well. A moment's thought reminded her that her uncle had probably not had time to draw it up. She set down her burden, took the windlass, and hauled up the empty receptacle. Then she packed it carefully, sandwiches and Thermos flask at the top, and lowered it steadily.

Long she leaned breathless over the stone edge, listening for a sound. She neither heard nor saw anything. The bucket hung untouched. Perhaps he was asleep? She waited.

The minutes ticked on, and there came no slightest vibration of the chain, no sound from below. She knew that she was not before but after her time. He must be expecting her; the Squire had told him he would be relieved the third evening. Perhaps his watch had stopped and he did not know the time. Even then he would have watched—all the more he would have watched.

She waited a quarter of an hour. By this time her mind had made every terrific excursion possible. He had been eaten by rats. He had climbed up out of the well, driven desperate by the solitude, and had been taken by the Germans in wait. He had fallen into the water in the pitchy murk—perhaps walking in his sleep.

Anyhow, he was not there. At last she decided that

at all costs she must go down and find out. Were she to return to the house unsatisfied she thought she would go mad before morning. Who could have foreseen that this adventure could turn out so complicated, so awful?

Slowly she wound up the bucket again with its undisturbed contents.

Methodically she packed the supplies once more into the string bag. Just as she was about to fasten it round her waist, a thought came to her. If she went down the well, nobody knowing that she had done so, and found the prisoner gone, she was doomed. She could not climb out again. Even if Captain Mornoch were still down there he might be ill and unable to extricate himself or her. She must return to the house, write a note to Hugh, asking him to come to her aid, and pin it on her pin-cushion, to be found if she were not in her bed when the maid came to call her.

No sooner said than done. Leaving her burden by the well, she fled back to the postern door, which it took some time to find. Entering, she once more slipped off her boots, patiently crept upstairs, gained her room, found pencil and paper, scribbled her message, and returned.

Never before had she tried to get into the bucket with nobody to steady it. The heavy bag she carried made the enterprise still more perilous. Seated on the well parapet, with her feet in the bucket, pausing before pushing off, she muttered with a rueful laugh:

"All this for Saska's lover!"

She knew that, with no hand to regulate the windlass, her descent would be horribly rapid. She thought it likely that she would be bumped from side to side of the shaft. It was not certain that, without the boat-hook, she would be able to open the door when she got there. Yet all these contingencies must be braved.

She had got to descend the well *coûte que coûte!*

Clenching her teeth and grasping the chain firmly with both hands she let herself drop as gently as she could. The windlass flew round, with a horrible, whirring noise. She went down fast, and brought up with a sickening jerk.

However, she was down. She had slipped her torch into the breast pocket of her coat, and at this depth she thought she might use it without fear. Therefore she fixed the catch, and the weird, hollow silence of the dreadful place became visible. By holding on to the chain and curving her body and legs, she managed to get near enough to the side to grasp the short chain which hung from a staple in the jamb of the narrow doorway. But even clinging to this, it was all she could do to avoid upsetting and plumping into the water. Careful manœuvring brought her to rest on the slightly projecting stone sill. Had the door been shut, she believed that she could not have done it. As it was, she disembarked safely, and stood in the cold tunnel, panting and shuddering with the effort she had made.

Up the stairs she crept, her small white face, with its wide, terrified stare, lifted to confront any bogey that might be lurking in wait. The door of his dungeon was closed. It yielded at once upon her turning the latch, and she entered.

It was pitch dark. Had his lights run short? The torch played around, and her worst fear—that of finding herself alone—was dispelled as she saw the prisoner lying upon his bed. His face was turned in towards the wall. He lay perfectly still. She sprang to his side and touched him. He was very cold. Setting down what she carried, she flung herself down beside him and bent over, close, close. He was breathing, though faintly. The relief was such that she trembled from head to foot.

She felt there was not a moment to waste. Hastily searching her stores, she found first of all two candles, which she lit. Then, filling up the stoves, she set kettles to boil. A pail of fresh water stood on the floor. Investigation showed that there was not a particle of food in the place. Nothing! Literally nothing at all!

Upon the blotting-pad on the table lay a half-sheet of paper, upon which was written the date, and below:

"Starving for the last eight-and-forty hours."

Horror turned her perfectly sick. How could it have happened? The Squire had assured her that he had plenty of stores for two days. She mixed hot tea with a tablespoonful of brandy, and set herself to arouse him. Kneeling down again she succeeded in turning him on his back, so startled at first by his growth of black beard that she was ready to fancy that it was the ghost of the old long-ago victim, and not Captain Mornoch, whose head lay in the crook of her arm.

She shook him gently, called to him, and after a long time, as it seemed, he moved and gave a sigh. She succeeded, then, in making him swallow a little neat brandy in a spoon. In a minute or two his eyes opened.

He smiled, as not at all surprised, but well content.

"This is the right dream," he muttered. "Thank God for that."

"Do you know me?" asked Deirdre eagerly. "Try to speak—tell me who I am?"

"Deirdre," he said, and smiled again.

He had never called her Deirdre in his life, and she knew that he was but half-conscious. Still, he had answered, and correctly. She now held the cup of hot tea to his lips, and he drank, sip by sip. When it was finished the kettles were boiled over. She laid him down, ran to the stoves, filled both his hot-water bottles,

and put one to his feet, the other to his side. He lay, open-eyed, watching her movements with at first a complete calm, which by degrees dawned into faint surprise. There was just enough water left for a cup of Bovril. She took some biscuits from her bag, broke them into it, and then, returning to her post beside him, said gently:

"Do you think you could sit up and let me feed you?"

He smiled whimsically.

"I can try," he replied, rather as though it were a game which they were playing.

She slipped her arm under him, helping him to rise, pushed a pillow behind to support him, and covered him carefully.

"Now," said she, "a little very light supper."

He answered her smile with another, but a look crept into his long, curiously coloured eyes which showed her that he was beginning to reflect, to wonder. She fed him with the broth, and he took it at her hand. So famished was he that he spoke no word, asked no question, until he had eaten all.

Then, as he lay back feeling that he could eat and eat for hours, yet that his internal mechanism hesitated, even about the amount already swallowed, his overmastering anxiety found vent for the first time in connected speech.

"I suppose," said he faintly, "that your uncle is dead?"

Deirdre, the empty bowl in her hand, paused in amaze.

"Uncle John dead? Why, what should make you think so?"

He looked distressed and puzzled.

"Would not have abandoned me . . . here . . . to starve," he faintly muttered.

The girl came back to his side.

"Is there nothing the matter with you but just—hunger?" she asked earnestly.

"And cold," he answered.

'Then perhaps I had better explain what has happened."

"I can probably guess. The traitors are on the watch. He has been cut off from visiting me."

"But he told you—he explained—in a letter—when he let down the last bucketful of provisions before he went away."

"I have had no letter and no provisions for four days."

The girl gave a cry of sympathy.

"Oh, but what happened? What can have happened?" she demanded passionately.

"The bucket caught on the side of the well and capsized, I suppose. It was hanging there, just out of my reach, all the time."

VII

"JUST out of your reach?" she repeated pitifully.

"If I could have got a hold on that chain, do you think I would have stayed down here to starve?" he asked vehemently.

She snatched her handkerchief and turned away to hide the fast-flowing tears.

"How dreadful! How dreadful!" she sobbed.

It brought him to his feet.

"Deirdre! You are crying! You mustn't do that! Don't, for pity's sake, or I shall forget myself! And look at me! I must be like a demon of the pit, unshorn and ghastly—a pretty kind of fellow to console a beautiful girl! Have a little mercy on me, and tell me how you come here, in this foul, tainted place, full of the agonies of the dead!"

"The dead!" she repeated, shuddering, and instinctively her warm hand went out to his and clasped it. "Ah!" she whispered, "I was not afraid when I had made certain that you were here, but if I had not found you I think I should have gone mad with fear!"

"Who let you down?"

"Why, I let myself down."

"Heavens above! Are you an Irish elf? Shall I find you suddenly melt away like a moonbeam strayed here into this noxious den?"

"Uncle said I must tell nobody, and I was not to come unless he found it impossible to get back."

She told him all that had happened, confessing her overhearing of the conversation on the night of the hide-and-seek game. His surprise increased at every sentence. She had gone out by herself upon the cliff! She had flashed the signal message in the absence of himself and Devenish! She had hoodwinked Starr Berger, and now she had saved him, just in time!

The thought of her beauty and her intrepidity, her resource and her daring, swam before him like a glittering dream. He thrust the perilous sweetness away from him. She had done and dared all this, not for him but for the cause of England and the King. That cause was his. He stood for the safety of the grand new ship, with Captain John Devenish aboard of her, and everything personal must be thrust out of sight.

Somehow or other, at once, without delay, a signal must be flashed from Dym Point.

Deirdre saw him pull himself together, saw his eyes and lips set with the effort of concentration, and her heart leapt up in hope.

"What is the time?" he asked, as abruptly as though he had been speaking to one of his own sex in normal circumstances.

"It must be one o'clock, I think."

"And our submarine will remain on the look-out until two," he rejoined, reflecting aloud, with perfect confidence in her. "Well, I must get there by two, somehow."

"There! Where?"

"On the cliff. Do you think I might venture now on something more substantial to eat?"

"I think you might eat these," said she. "I cut them so that you might have a meal in a very short time, feeling sure you would want to do just what you say—race out on to the cliffs. But—— Oh, I forgot! We can't get out, can we?"

"Get out? Of course we can if the bucket is down. Do you think I can't go up a chain? I can climb up and then haul you, unless somebody has pulled up the bucket out of reach."

"I took care of that. I moored it to the staple," said Deirdre calmly; and he could not resist the cry:

"You marvellous girl!"

She made no answer to this, turning away her head lest he should see the torrent of colour that suffused her face. While he ate his sandwiches she went about the wretched place setting all tidy. As she gathered up some loose papers she caught sight of her own name. It was a letter to herself! She read but the few words that lay immediately under her eye in a singularly legible hand. They caused her to tremble dangerously. With a great effort she recaptured her poise, thrust the written papers out of sight, and turned a composed face to him as he rose from the table.

"Come!" he said—merely that; but the look of trust, of admiration, that went with it was a thing he could not help, and of which he was not even conscious.

"I may bungle over this," he owned, as they gained the well shaft. "I am feeling horribly shaky—I own

it. But don't be afraid that I shall fall. I won't do that."

The cold air of the winter night helped to revive him. She steadied the chain as he caught hold, and to his relief he found that his muscles had withstood his long fast better than he had dared hope.

Deirdre stood in the narrow doorway, watching his ascent, with joined hands and lips moving in prayer. He was up—he was out! She heard his low, urgent voice.

"All well! Is there anything I can do to help. Can you get into the bucket?"

"I will somehow," said she, feeling that under present circumstances nothing was too hard.

With care she steadied herself, clinging with all her might, and slowly the windlass revolved. As the slimy sides slipped past her, and she felt the air coming to her ever more and more freshly, she thought of her terrors when she let herself down upon that ghastly descent.

She was at the top. Mornoch fastened the catch, came round, and lifted her in his arms from the bucket.

He set her down upon the flags, but without releasing her. For a long moment they clung together there, with not a word spoken, each panting and glowing with an experience too strange for any comment to seem possible.

When he let her go he made no apology; he did not even discuss the wisdom of her accompanying him to the cliffs. He merely took her hand, and they passed together through the door of the courtyard.

Once outside it was she who took the lead. She guided him down the nut-walk and into the little wood —a route he did not know. Had he taken it before he would never have encountered Wilks patrolling, as he had once done.

He was astonished, or would have been, could any-

thing that concerned her astonish him any more, to see the ability with which she scouted, pausing, listening, choosing the least obvious way. When they reached the limit of the wood she stopped.

"Now listen," said she earnestly. "I have a plan. If they have posted a watch here they will be desperate. It will be a watch strong enough to seize you. The Bergers have completely deceived poor old Wilks; he thinks you are on the side of the Germans and as he knows no more of signalling than a sheep might, he will stop you if he finds you. But as regards me, it is different. Stan may have told him that I am coming out to-morrow night to look; anyway, he will not suspect me of trying to signal. I think I can deal with him, so I suggest that you wait here and eat some biscuits while I go on and make sure. If all is quiet, I will come back and fetch you."

"That will be best," he admitted.

"Then shall I go?"

"Yes, please. I am using you as if you were a street urchin instead of a great lady. But it is England, not I, who uses you."

She was gone with those words in her ear. Out on the cliff path she stopped, glancing to and fro, her hands in her coat pockets, and it was not long before she heard a slow, measured footstep approaching.

Placing herself well in the centre of the road she walked towards the sound, in full evidence, as soon as Sergeant Wilks and his torch came round the corner.

"Ah!" said the policeman sharply, and for a moment he stopped short and looked inclined to bolt. Then he came on, and the more bravely as soon as he perceived, which he quickly did, that it was nothing more alarming than Miss Nugent who confronted him.

"Why, miss, miss, what are you doing out here," he cried, "at this time of the night?"

"Is that you, Wilks?" she cried, like one distracted. "Oh, where is Mr. Berger? I mean young Mr Berger?"

"Young Mr. Berger?" queried Wilks, bewildered. "Well, if you must know, 'e's a helpin' of me to lay some rascally signalling traitors by the heels."

Deirdre went close up to the big man and laid her two energetic hands upon his blue sleeve.

"Wilks, is he very far off?" she cried. "Too far off for you to find him? Oh, Wilks, it is most fearfully important. Something that I must tell him myself—my own self!"

"What's that, miss?" cried Wilks fearfully.

"Just what I say. I have found out something—something of the very first importance, and if Mr. Berger does not come and hear it I do not know what may happen! Now Wilks, where is he? Can you find him? Can you take a message?"

Wilks looked much perturbed.

"Couldn't you take it yourself, miss?" he asked "This here's my beat as I didn't ought to go off of."

"I can't—how can I? How do I know where he is? And what would anybody think to see me appearing at two o'clock in the morning? Oh, Wilks, do hurry, there's a sensible fellow! Go to Mr. Berger, and say I am waiting for him here by Dym Point, and that I have something to tell him which he simply *must* know! I will wait here while you go, and let you know if anybody comes by while you are gone. Oh, do go! You will be sorry all your life if you do not!"

"Well, if it's so partickler as all that——"

"Wilks, how long shall you be? How soon can you bring him back?"

"Half an hour, miss, good. That's if I find him at once. Longer, most probably."

"I'll wait an hour! Off with you!"

The man moved a little way, then turned.

"You ain't a-going off the road, miss? You won't think of going down the cliff path, will you, in this dark night?"

"Good, careful Wilks, to warn me!" she laughed. "I'm safe enough if only you will fetch Mr. Berger!"

But when he had gone she fled to the place where she had left Mornoch.

"Quick!" she breathed. "But listen a moment first. Have you a revolver?"

"Yes, I have. Shall I need it?"

"They have got a man there on the look-out. I am sure of it from what Wilks said. He is probably armed."

"I've got something that may be more useful than a revolver," he whispered—"chloroform. Could you carry it if I saturate some wool?"

She agreed eagerly.

"I will go down the usual way—the way he will expect someone to come. He won't shoot if I speak, if he knows it is a woman. He will hesitate, wonder what to do, and by that time you will have crawled down the short path and can grip him from behind."

"It's too dangerous for you."

"It is nothing of the kind. I run no danger, and haste is everything! Now, are you ready?"

He was most reluctant, but he made no further objection, for every moment was precious.

They advanced without noise until they were at the very verge. She indicated the precipitous slide which he was to descend, and then she herself began to scramble noisily down the path, pausing presently to call out pleadingly:

"Mr. Berger! Stan! Are you there?"

There was no reply, but she heard a movement. Her

voice, her words, had given warning of her sex, and she went on fearlessly.

Flashing her torch as she came round the bramble bush, she saw a form loom up from the ground.

"Stan! Is it you?" she cried. "I have been looking for you everywhere——"

"It ees not Stanislaus," said a deep, guttural voice, "but I vill geef him a message."

"Oh! Oh! Who are you?" cried Deidre, in simulated terror, and made a step backward as she saw a movement behind, and something sprang upon the German, bearing him down to earth. She ran forward then, and took the chloroformed wool from Mornoch's hands, holding it well over the struggling man's nostrils and mouth, while the Captain disarmed him and drew out a slender but strong cord from his pocket.

"Not a moment to lose," he said between his teeth; "leave me to pinion him, take your torch, try and get the ship. I'll give the code."

She was hardly conscious of her wildly leaping pulses nor her intense excitement, so utterly was she bent upon doing what they had to do.

It seemed hours, yet, as a matter of fact, it was but six minutes, before they got a reply from the pitch-black horizon.

The moment it came, Captain Mornoch took the torch from her and began to conduct the conversation himself. Feverishly he worked while the minutes sped on, and Deirdre sat on the grass, faint, sick, with reeling head.

At last he spoke.

"That will do it," he said unsteadily. "I think we have fixed them now. The one point that troubles me is this beast here. I can't drag him up to the wood. I feel pretty well at the end of my tether. But if we

leave him here they will carry him off—they will rescue him."

"They can't," said she, "as far as I can see, carry him off anywhere except to Dymleigh Towers. He is the Bergers' uncle, and if the ship out there sends a wireless message to Exeter they will all be arrested early to-morrow morning. The best thing we can do is to unbind him, take away his chloroform gag, and let them find him unconscious at his post."

"My word, but you are quick!" he said, laughing in his appreciation. "As fast as you can, then; we have just time!"

Their victim was unbound at top speed, and then up they went. She could see that it was all Mornoch could do to make the summit. They listened, crouching, at the side of the road, but heard no footsteps. With a final dash they gained the cover of the little wood, and there they must perforce wait a few minutes for the exhausted man to recover his breath. To their strained ears came presently the distant—very distant—thud of feet—someone running. They knew their flashes, or at least the replies, must have been seen, and guessed that Wilks would come in for a bad time.

Meanwhile Deirdre urged him on.

"We must get in," she said; "we simply must, if you can anyhow manage it. This is the last effort; we have done our duty—now make yourself safe!"

"Oh," he muttered feebly, "I don't matter much . . . to anybody."

"For my sake," said Deirdre firmly, and without a word he rose to his feet and went on.

They shut and barred the little gate of the haunted courtyard, without any sound of pursuit. But when they found themselves safe they hardly knew what to do. To escape the cold of the night they repaired to the stairs leading down from the Nun's passage, and

seated themselves, side by side, to consider plans.

For a while Mornoch was too exhausted to say much. He sat, one step below the girl, leaning his head against her, until his faintness had passed.

Gradually his mind began to work again, and he decided that he had better return to the well until the morning. If all went as he was now fairly sure that it must, the Bergers—father, son and uncle—would be arrested early; the wireless message would have been flashed to Exeter, and the secret police would take a car without delay to the scene. As soon as the spies were arrested, there could be no least reason why Captain Mornoch should not reappear, nor why the whole family should not know of his incarceration and its reason.

He had now plenty of stores and methylated spirit. He could keep warm, give himself breakfast, and after a few hours' rest would be more or less his own man again.

He said no word, gave no slightest hint of love-making. The black stubble on his chin made him feel that it would be unseemly. With her help he was lowered again into the horrible place, and Deirdre crept away to lie down in bed with a heart so full of various emotions that she felt as if she must wake and find it all a dream. The moment her eyes closed she was back on the cliff; the dim bulk of an unknown man rose before her—a man who might shoot. . . . Then someone clasped him from behind; he was dragged down; she thought a pistol went off, but could not be sure. . . .

There was a crashing, pounding knock upon the door, and she sprang up in bed, fear upon her white face.

"Deirdre, Deirdre, mayn't we come in? Have you any idea how late it is? When *are* you coming down to breakfast? Oh!" as Hugh, Charlie and May all

burst in, and stood aghast at the sight of her still in bed, and rubbing sleepy eyes.

"My goodness, Deirdre, you ought to get up; you wouldn't guess what has happened, not if you were to guess all day!"

Deirdre was wide awake now. She held out her arms to May, who sprang upon the bed.

"Well, what *has* happened? Do tell me, like the angel children you are!"

They all chorused at once, and it was difficult to make out any sense at first, but by degrees she gathered that at six o'clock that morning a motor-car had arrived at Dymleigh Towers, and that not only the two Bergers and the uncle had been arrested, but also old Wilks, who seemed to have been mixed up in their schemes.

"The old Johnnie went perfectly stark raving mad when they took him," cried Hugh, "and began to babble the most frightful rot. He said it was we who were the traitors and not the Bergers; that we had harboured a spy and a renegade, and that you—what price you, Deirdre?—you were a Fenian and a traitor, and that you had met him on the cliff at one o'clock last night, and had sent him off his beat with a bogus message!"

"I say, Wilks is a genius after all!" cried Deirdre, with a wild chuckle, hugging May in ecstasy.

"Great, isn't it?" cried Hugh. "But the worst of it is, old girl, that you will have to come down and interview a very polite gentleman who says he is in the Intelligence department."

"All right, I haven't the smallest objection," said Deirdre. "Off with you all; bring me some breakfast, for I am fearfully hungry; and ask the Government agent if he can wait while I dress. I have a great deal to tell him."

"Oh, but you haven't heard half the news yet," went on Charles. "The most exciting bit is still to come. Old Perrott was out in his yawl quite early this morning, just as it was getting light, somewhere at the mouth of the bay. He heard a funny noise, then, behold! something emerged from the water, a good way off him, and he could see it was a submarine. It was not light enough for him to see the uniforms; he could just make out men on the top of her. She sent a light—to investigate him, I suppose—and he said he thought his last moment had come, and was just beginning to say his prayers when he heard a boom from behind and a swishing sound, and the submarine toppled and fell over, or went under, and he saw the men swept off her. He luffed up, as close as he could, and a man swam to him, and he hauled him in, and then another; and then he saw the swine were German—they couldn't talk a word of sense, he said. And just as he was wondering if they were going to murder him there was a little rush and a ripple, and an English submarine shot alongside him, as close as two peas in a pod.

"'Good morning,' says the commander, a young chap not more than five-and-twenty. 'I'll relieve you of your prisoners, if you like.'"

The result of this graphic description was so amazing that Charles paused, choked, and grew crimson. For Deirdre—the plucky Deirdre who never cried—was weeping helplessly into her pillows. All she could say was:

"Oh, thank God! Thank God!" But after a while she managed to sob out the further information:

"They had just been to the wharf—the Bergers had been fuelling them. They were going to torpedo Uncle John on board the *Jason!*"

When the whirlwind of comment excited by this sensational announcement had a little subsided, Hugh

expressed the general feeling in one succinct phrase:

"Some scum, those Bergers—what?"

The Secret Service officer never forgot his first sight of Deirdre as she walked into the hall to interview him. He thonght she looked like Joan of Arc.

She told him, simply, the story of her trust, and of how she had succeeded in rescuing Captain Mornoch from his durance just in time. Then when the narration was complete, she led them into the haunted courtyard, and Hugh and the inspector drew up Captain Mornoch.

This was a person very unlike the gaunt, starving captive of the previous night. He was shaved and brushed and neatly dressed, and he and the stranger greeted each other with a cordial shake of the hand.

Then he gave his own version of what had taken place, and Deirdre stood smothered in blushes under the admiring eyes of the entire household assembled to do her honour.

Sacharissa was there, and Larrie, who had rushed to the house to bring the wonderful news. Sacharissa was so mortified that she had not a word to say. Her cousin's triumph was her own humiliation. Lenox remembered his suspicions of Mornoch, and could have kicked himself with pleasure for a conceited slacker.

"But, please," said Miss Nugent, by way of a reply to the compliments paid her by the new-comer, "please let out poor Wilks. He was thoroughly hoodwinked by the Bergers. I was sorry to be obliged to deceive him last night, but I know how long it takes to make him understand anything, and every moment was precious. He would not have believed my word; he was convinced that Captain Mornoch was a spy. But don't let him suffer more than you are obliged. Those people were too clever for him."

"For me, too; I confess it with shame," said Larrie,

with a burning face, approaching Mornoch, and hol ing out his hand. It was warmly grasped.

"You've had your experience," said Mornoch hea ily, "and experience is always useful."

"You have had an experience I should think y wouldn't want to repeat," returned Larrie admiringl "I couldn't have stuck it—in that horrible hole—for single night—no, blest if I could!"

Mornoch smiled. He felt as though he could g through it all again, and willingly, for the sake of th light that glowed in Deirdre's glorious eyes, which h happened to meet at the moment.

As he spoke one of the outdoor-men ran into the ha and cried to them all:

"The Squire's ship's out there, beyond the bay please, Miss Saska, and coastguard's up to sa he's sending the steam launch ashore for the lot o ye!"

With cries of delight the party broke up, the boy rushing away to look out to sea, Saska upstairs to ge a hat and coat.

Mornoch found himself alone in the great hall with Deirdre, who was standing very still, her head averted

He made three strides and gained her side.

"Deirdre," he murmured, "who has won the bet? I swore to find you however well you hid yourself. Hav I won?"

She turned, with one swift movement, and he caugh her in his arms.

"But you shall have the tiara all the same," he told her presently. "My brother has no child, and I am hi heir. You will be Lady Mornoch one day, and the tiar will therefore come in very useful."

"Then I may tell the boys I have won my bet?" she asked him tremulously. "It is only you who will know how badly I am defeated."

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